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PREMIERE ISSUE

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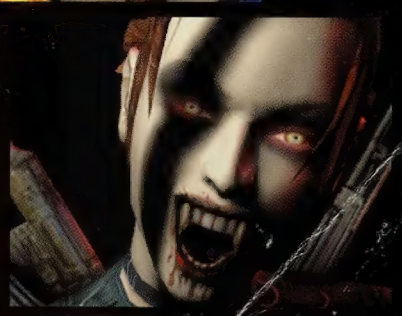

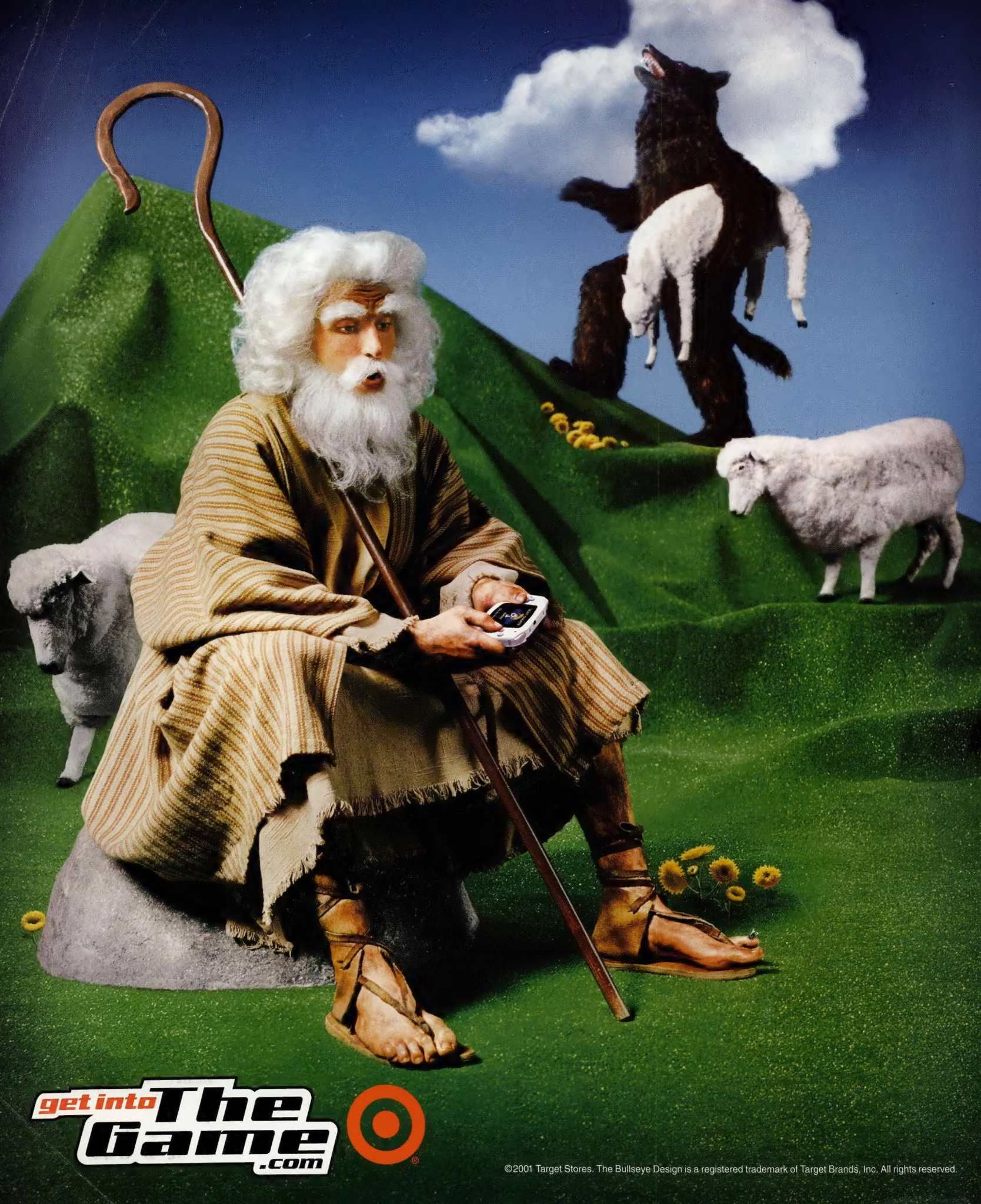

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play

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
DAVE HALVERSON
dhalverson@play-magazine.com

While we were somewhat nervous launching a magazine in the midst of bio terrorism, the more we thought about it, the more we began to think that perhaps our timing couldn't be better. As Americans, we celebrate our freedom by having fun—by playing games, going to movies, watching TV and buying cool stuff. We *work* hard so that we can *play* hard—and that's what this magazine is all about. The day some cave dweller gets in the way of that, we'll send out the *Quake* clans. As we closed this—our first issue—the World Series is underway, Jordan is playing basketball again and my San Diego Chargers are 5-and-2. So life is somewhat normal…Wait, Jordan's back and the Chargers are 5-and-2? Okay, so things are still kinda weird—but you get my drift.

Gaming—what we do best here at **PLAY**—is on the brink of a ground-breaking season as the industry enters the single greatest quarter since the dot hit the paddle in *Pong*. Besides the two most powerful machines to ever harness game data launching within days of each other—the Xbox and GameCube, which both live up to the hype and then some—Sony has more "A" titles than you can shake an American Express card at. *ICO*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Devil May Cry*, *Jak and Daxter*, *Giants*, *Maximo* and too many more stunners to list are all being released within weeks of one another.

> 'As Americans we celebrate our freedom by having fun–by playing games, going to movies...

But **PLAY** doesn't stop there—because neither do you. As you thumb through the pages that follow, you'll notice that we have quite a bit of—for lack of a better term—"lifestyle" coverage. Believe or not, there are a few things in life as intoxicating as videogames (yes, it's true) so by leaving some of the prosaic game filler on the cuting room floor, we offer editorial that fits that mold; Japanese anime, some of the edgier fare on TV and DVD, in gear and music—and anything else that sparks our interest.

Over the next few issues, we'll be beefing up **PLAY** with more import news and reviews, in-depth features on gaming culture and a few surprises that we think you're going to really enjoy. Of course, much of that will be determined by *your* feedback—so don't be shy!

Now go **PLAY**.

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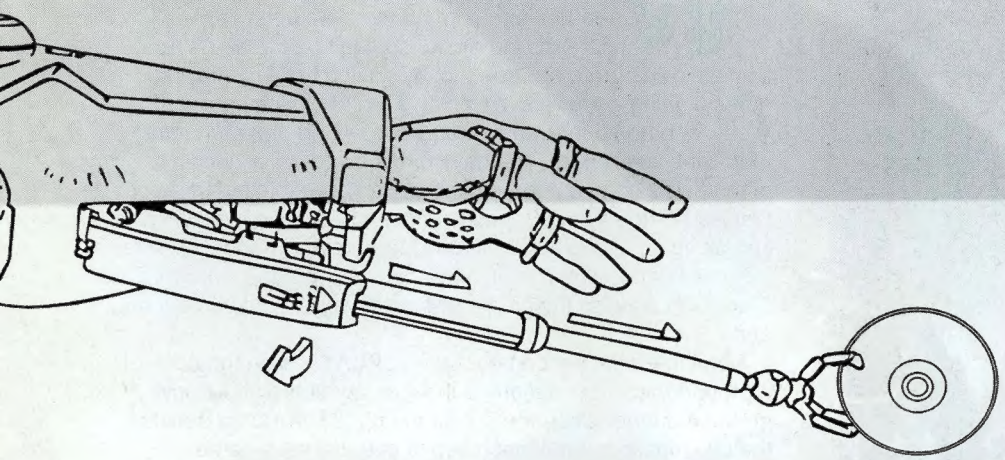

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REALLY DOES MATTER.

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Born in Van Nuys, CA. Did eight years of Catholic school. High school was a blur. Raced motocross, rode skateboards. Started playing videogames. Decided he never wanted to stop.

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Smart for his age—he's 4. Loves movies. He's a junket whore. Waits for FedEx like a rabid dog. We like Jon. And Jon likes...*Little Man Tate*? Don't tell anybody...offline.

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Quiet. Cool. No one knows where he goes or what he does—but he probably does it *really* well. Has a cat named Bubo. Smokes...at racing games.

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A charming fellow with a love for anime and cars. He also smokes...his tires. Pleasure: giving crap to Eisenberg(s). Has a Vivid imagination. Wears cool pants.

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cover story

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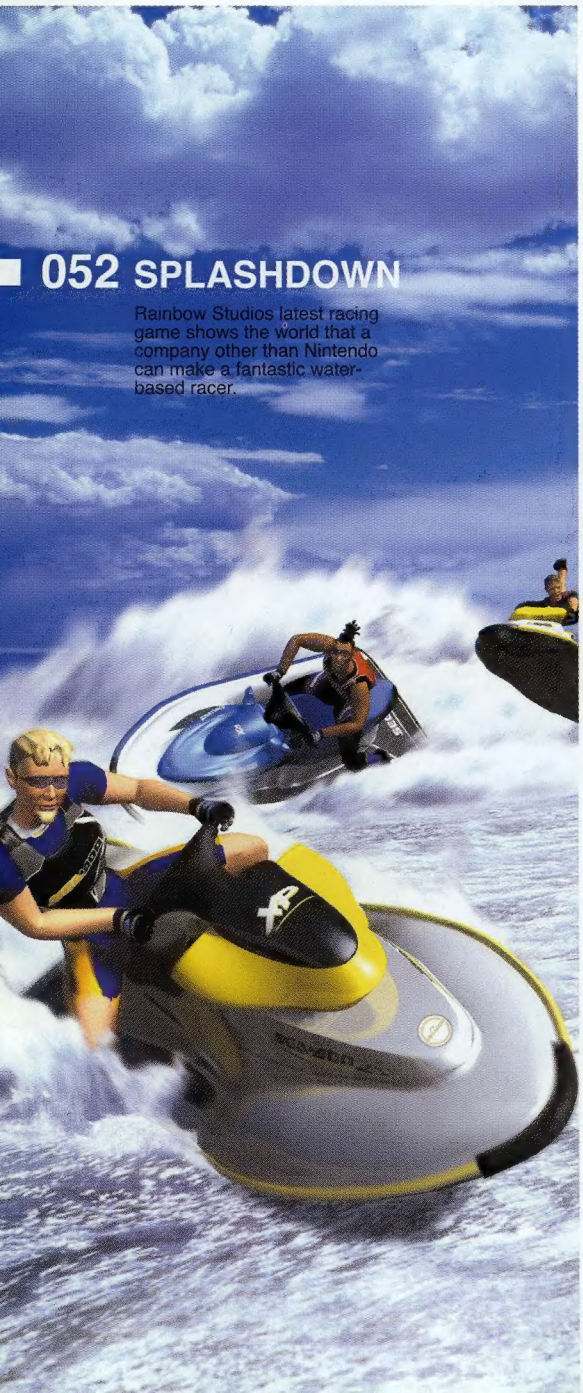
Imagine a game that encompasses every aspect of action, adventure, and storytelling integrated within a single, massive, real-time world. Find out what makes Jak and Daxter tick in this month's revealing cover story..



052 SPLASHDOWN

Rainbow Studios latest racing game shows the world that a company other than Nintendo can make a fantastic water-based racer.

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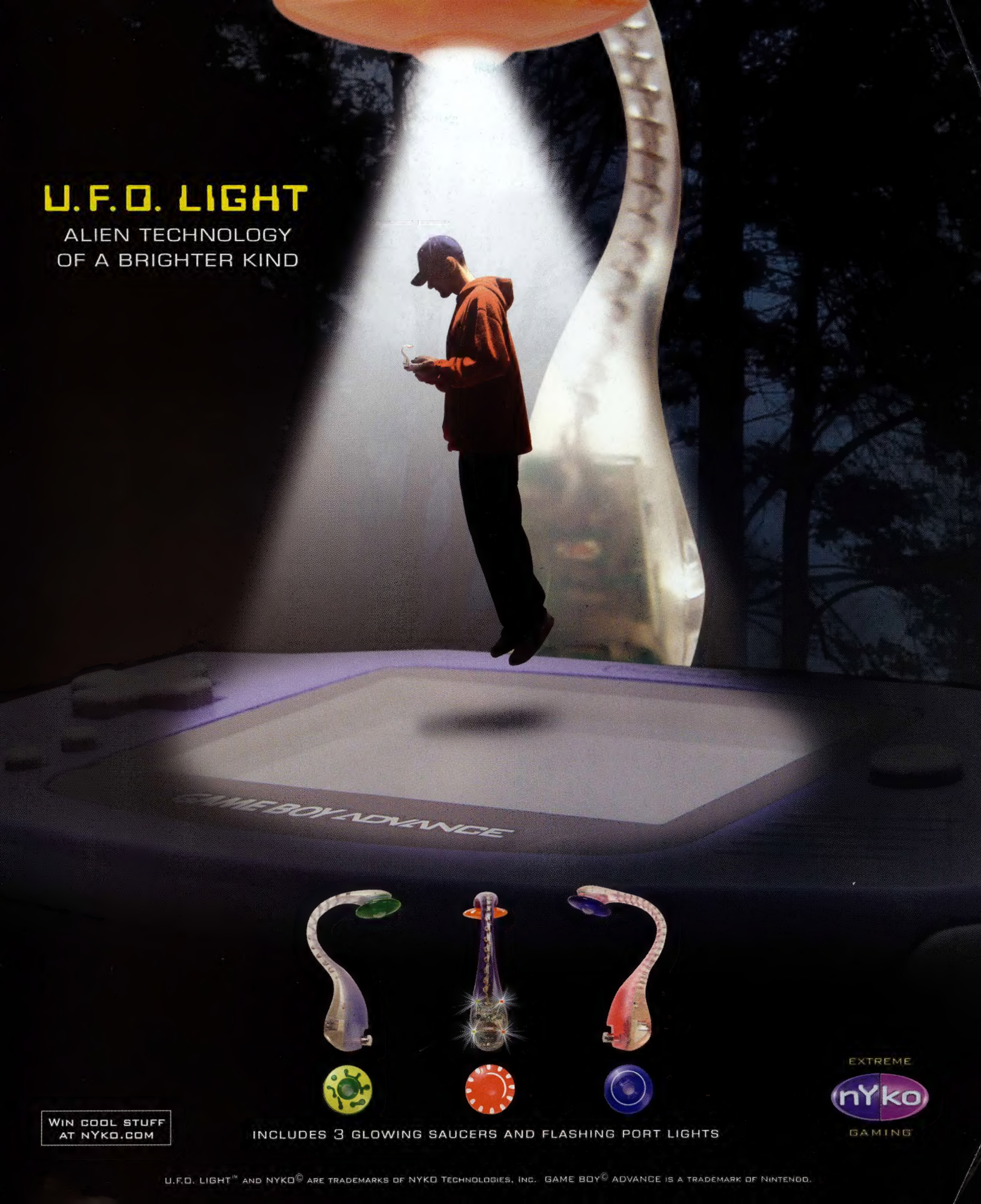
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Blood
Violence

PlayStation 2

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EONS AGO, IN THE DARKEST REACHES OF HELL, A DEMON SWORDSMAN NAMED SPARDA
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EDITED BY **PLAY STAFF**

ET CALLS BACK

When E.T. phoned home for the first time, Drew Barrymore didn't have breasts yet. Think he has a cell phone by now?

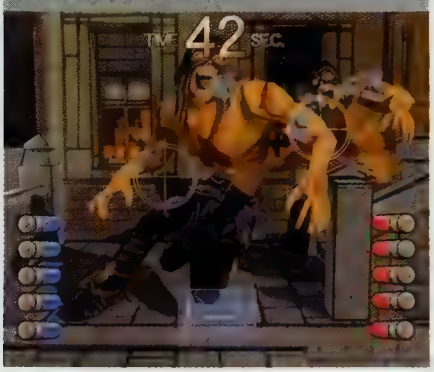
In an age before cell phones—before Steven Spielberg was an institution—a squatty, little alien captured the hearts and minds of America. It's unfathomable why it has taken so long, but E.T. is finally phoning home to the tune of *seven* videogames. Beginning with three for Game Boy Color—*Digital Companion*, a PDA-like software application; *Escape form Planet Earth*, a mission-based action game, and *E.T. and The Cosmic Garden*, a real-time activity adventure. Think *Harvest Moon*—E.T. style.

For the Game Boy Advance, *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* takes players through a movie-style adventure pitting you against challenges akin to the film, like piloting Elliott's bike and fleeing from the authorities (which is always fun). For the PlayStation, *E.T. Interplanetary Adventure*—an isometric action game—hits this month; and then next year, E.T. hits the big time with *Return to the Green Planet* for the PS2, scheduled for March, and a PS2 version of *The Cosmic Garden*.

OUR HOUSE

'House of the Dead 3' comes to Xbox

This is the first real release of Sega's House of the Dead 3 for the Xbox. As you can see, the series has undergone a major visual overhaul—with all-around technology unlike any we have seen before. This early next year, there is no word yet on a PAL release for the system.



JAPAN TOP 20 2001

Japan's Dengeki Top 20 console game list is in. Golf and Hampsters and seem all the rage otherwise things seem somewhat normal...

1. Final Fantasy X Square PS2 RPG 2,363,028
2. Gran Turismo 3 A-Spec Sony PS2 Racing 1,633,260
3. Everybody's Golf 3 Sony PS2 Sports 742,107
4. Devil May Cry Capcom PS2 Action 562,803
5. Mariokart Advance Nintendo GBA Racing 489,860
6. Hamster Tarou 2 Nintendo GBC Adventure 426,510
7. Yugioh Duel Monsters 5: Expert 1 Konami GBA Card Battle 393,245
8. From TV Animation One Piece Ground Battle* Bandai PS Fighting 389,680
9. Super Mario Advance* Nintendo GBA Action 380,784
10. Shin Sangoku Musou 2 Koei PS2 Action 363,413
11. Tear Ring Saga Enterbrain PS SRPG 338,491
12. Dragon Quest Monsters 2: Mysterious Key of Martha: Iru's Adventure Enix GBC RPG 324,556
13. From TV Animation One Piece: Birth of the Pirate Dream Banpresto GBC RPG 300,463
14. Jikkyou Powerful Pro Baseball 2001 Konami PS Sports 289,621
15. From TV Animation One Piece: Let's Dash out Pirates Bandai PS RPG 288,766
16. Jikkyou Powerful Pro Baseball 8 Konami PS2 Sports 287,155
17. Ace Combat 04: Shattered Skies Namco PS2 Shooter 275,492
18. Tactic Orge Gaiden: The Knight of Lodis Nintendo GBA SRPG 271,287
19. Dragon Quest Monsters 2: Mysterious Key of Martha: Ruka's Journey* Enix GBC RPG 252,739
20. Pocket Monster Crystal Nintendo GBC RPG 248,721

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PlayStation 2

MATURE M
Blood
Violence
Strong Language

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Note: Rockstar will be following IDSA guidelines for M rated games in the marketing of this game.

This game contains violent language and behavior and may not be appropriate for persons under the age of 17. It is a comic interpretation of gangster activity and the story, names and incidents portrayed herein are fictitious. No identification or similarity to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events is intended or should be inferred. Any resemblance is coincidental. The makers and publishers of this videogame do not in any way endorse, condone or encourage this kind of behavior.

e-bay ODDITY OF THE MONTH

Toilet Brush of Death

Some(how shall we say it?) peculiar lad took the time to create this goth masterpiece—and now he wants you to have it. God bless eBay! If Marilyn Manson doesn't own one of these, he should. This is, without a doubt, one of the most bizarre—yet oddly useful—items we've run across. That unpleasant brown ring in the bottom of your toilet bowl will up and run for its life when it see's this brush coming! And it's waiting for you now on eBay—where America shops. Hurry up and bid though, a lot of tiny humans have to buy the farm to make another one.

STRANGE PEOPLE

INDUSTRY PLAY

Each month, we'll be introducing you to some of the personalities working behind the scenes from PR and marketing to storyboard artists and programmers. We begin with the girls from Highwater Group: Tara Blanco and Lara Heeb. PR agencies, and the people brave enough to work at them, are the conduit between us and the industry's developers and publishers—the people we bug every day of the week and sometimes, even on weekends...

What do you like most about dealing with the press?

Tara - I enjoy the camaraderie and the actual friendships that develop over time. Almost everyone in the industry is extremely pleasant to work with and I find that they are open to a wide variety of pitches, features and topics. I also like the fact that some of them can even keep up when we go out at night.

What do you dislike most about dealing with the press?

Laura - I completely respect the editors' responsibility to review our clients' games and I think that the majority of the time they try to be fair—but it's difficult when a review of a bad game turns into a negative attack of the company itself. While a poor product receiving a poor review is certainly warranted, I never feel it's appropriate to act contemptible towards the entire organization.

Is it nuts working with developers?

Laura - Not at all! I think developers can be a tremendous asset when trying to generate great PR on a game and it's the developers that can give you the best understanding and vision of what the game will become. Let's face it, they're the ones the media really want to talk to and you can utilize them to achieve additional coverage. Their passion for their games really comes through in their interviews and game demos. It's important to balance requests for assets with the development schedule, but they're all pretty good in doing so.

What are your PR pet peeves?

Tara - When editors publish rumors that are untrue or they don't take the time to fact-check stories and as a result, publish incorrect information. We're sure to hear from our clients shortly after the article is published.

Laura - Yeah, cleaning up those rumor messes is never fun.

What's it like to be surrounded by rabid editors all of the time?

Laura - Oh please! We have a great time with the editors. When we get a chance to get out on the road for press tours and events, we're the ones always bugging them to hang out with us. We've literally kidnapped some of them from their offices and dragged them out.

Tara - Please. They are just boys messing with women, so it's really not a problem.

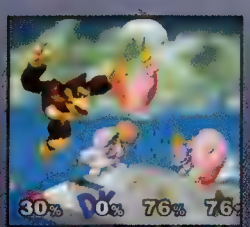
DID YOU WALK THE CAR?

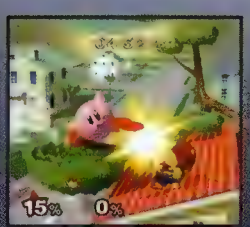
In a move sure to boggle the minds of Detroit auto execs, Toyota Motor and Sony Japan recently announced a joint effort to incorporate the technology of Sony's Aibo pet dog into a car. The vehicle, which is called the "Pod," observes the user's personality, tastes and interests and gradually begins to act accordingly based on the acquired data. In addition, the Pod also compares the user's driving habits and skills to a preset profile of an expert driver and then displays either praise or admonishment on its monitor. Sony was unclear as to exactly what driving "habits" the Pod will be critical of. Red light nose pickers beware!

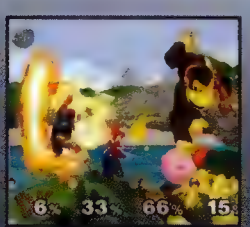
Upon leaving the car, the user can carry a "Mini Pod" that will continue to acquire data such as music and TV tastes. This data will then enable the Pod to predict appropriate times to play specific music automatically and record the names of musicians. If a recorded musician's name is then mentioned within the Pod, music by that artist will begin to play automatically. For example, the statement "God, I hate Yanni!" might cause Yanni music to immediately and automatically blare forth from all speakers! The Pod also comes equipped with a state-of-the-art face recognition system that can detect when a driver is falling asleep then warn other nearby motorists. If you hear "The driver is asleep! The driver is asleep!" head for the curb!

No word on whether Sony will incorporate any sort of failsafe device into the Pod to prevent it from automatically playing N' Sync at an unexpected moment.

SUPER SMASH BROS.™ Melee







Punches, kicks, elbows and knees. It's just a little touchy-feely between friends, as over 20 of your favorite characters go another round in a knock-down, drag-out brawlfest. Super Smash Brothers™ Melee, only for Nintendo GameCube.™

T TEEN
Comic Mischief
Mild Violence
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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CUBE WITH A VIEW

Followers of the Nintendo universe might have wondered why the GameCube was constructed with a handle—well, the mystery has finally been solved. Interact, one of many companies in the ever-expanding peripheral market, has manufactured a product like no other. They are the first accessory maker to announce an LCD screen for Nintendo's next-gen console. The Mobile Monitor 5.4—equipped with two stereo speakers, one headphone jack and volume control—will retail for $149.99. And even though it resembles a little person's commode, it promises to be a valuable gaming tool.

NEWSBYTES

Little more than a month after the tragic death of singer/actress **Aaliyah**, the cast and crew of ***The Matrix Reloaded*** mourned yet another loss. Gloria Foster, the actress who portrayed the film's cookie-baking prophet, The Oracle, passed away in early October at 64 years old. Like **Aaliyah**, she completed filming of *Reloaded*, but **Warner Bros.** is unsure if they will recast her character or write her out of the third film in the franchise . . . **Miramax** has nabbed the North American distribution rights (both theatrical and home video) for ***Ghost in the Shell 2***, much to the disappointment of **Manga**, mother of the original *Shell*. Studio bigwigs reportedly shelled out over $10 million for the high-profile anime sequel . . Citing "extraordinary losses," **Squaresoft** has abandoned the glamour of Hollywood. Reportedly, their film division, Square Pictures, suffered a 3.16 billion yen loss ($115 million US) due to the poor box office performance of ***Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within***, which banked a disappointing $30 million domestically—a far cry from the film's $137 million budget. Apparently, Square was also plotting CG versions of **Transformers** and **Everquest** to be translated to the silver screen . . . **Dimension Films** executives Bob Weinstein and Andrew Rona have snagged the latest in video-game-turned-movie fare, ***Alone in the Dark***. **Angry Films** will produce the feature that follows the exploits of supernatural investigators who become stranded on an island haunted by ghoulish, shadow-lurking creatures . . . Sources close to **Michael Jackson** profess that he is still, indeed, "The King of Pop" . . . Hot on the heels of celebrity dub-fests like ***Princess Mononoke*** and ***Kiki's Delivery Service***, Pioneer Entertainment recently unveiled that Juliette Lewis will headline the voice actor roster of the latest ***Armitage*** installment . . . 4/30 is the ratio of minutes that it took **Gamecube** to trample **Xbox** preorders on **Toysrus.com**. However, **PlayStation 2** still holds the console record, clocking in at a speedy 23 seconds . . . After numerous schedule changes, often a result of poor quality master prints from Japan, **Manga Video** has pinned the release of ***Neon Genesis Evangelion: Death & Rebirth*** to April 30, 2001. ***Evangelion: The Movie*** will follow on July 30 . . . Taiwanese media company, SMEC Media and Entertainment, has acquired the rights to produce an animated series adapted from Wang Du-Lu's ***Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*** book series, on which the **Ang Lee** film of the same name is based. The company is currently shopping the cartoon series around Hollywood...

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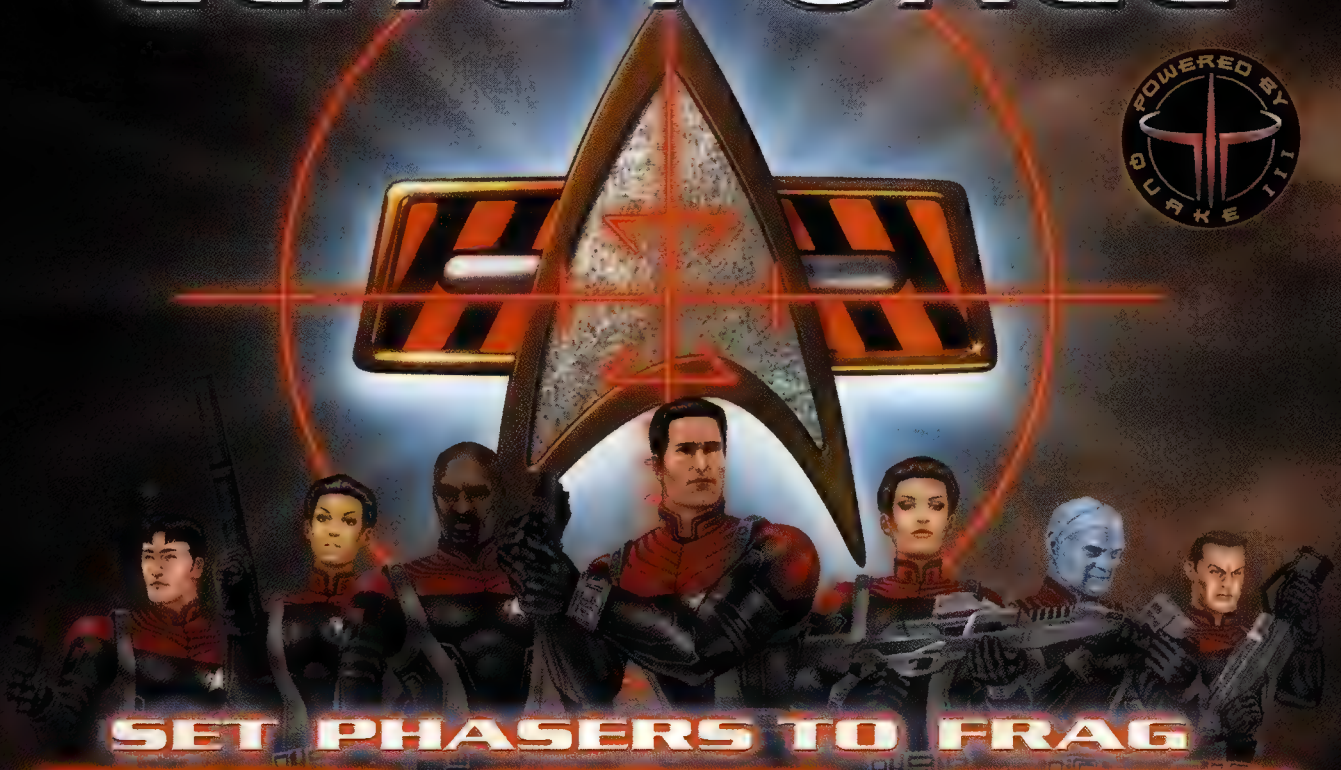
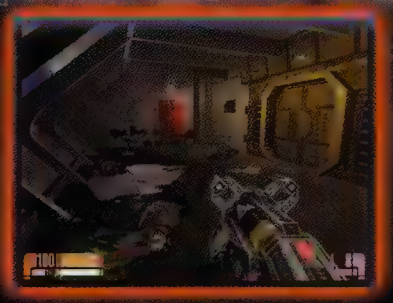


SET PHASERS TO FRAG

40 single player missions.



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4-player head-to-head action.

PlayStation.2

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

VIOLENCE

RAVEN ACTIVISION PITCH BLACK INTERACTIVE MAJESCO www.majescosales.com

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play GAMES

JAK AND DAXTER
GAMECUBE FEATURE
BLOODLUST
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XTREME G3 INTERVIEW
SILENT HILL 2 INTERVIEW
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SOUL REAVER
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GAME BOY ADVANCE REVIEWS
CAPSULE REVIEWS

DYNAMIC DUO

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER: NAUGHTY DOG
PUBLISHER: SONY
AVAILABLE: NOW

Naughty Dog's newest brain child may change the face of gaming as we know it

I still can't believe *Jak and Daxter* exists. I've been hearing about "the reinvention of gaming as we know it" since the first polygon, and now I'm finally seeing it—all of it, all the time. Miles of gameplay stretched out before me, people to interact with everywhere, vehicles deposited for me when and where I need them, water to swim and wade in whenever I feel the urge, and weather—morning, noon, night—even wind. By God, it's good to be alive!

Is it any wonder that this spectacle comes from the same team that brought us the pinnacle of action platforming for the PlayStation *Crash Bandicoot*? I knew Naughty Dog was up to something big, but to what extent, I had no idea. *Jak and Daxter* is truly groundbreaking—the first world action game. (You could call it an action, role-playing, platforming, racing, exploration, flying, problem solving, shooter—but that's a lot to remember.)

I suppose the thought of it isn't so far fetched, I just didn't realize that the technology existed to realize the vision. The game features a massive world that you can always see, teeming with activity from end to end, complete with a living underground, towering cliffs and even a chain of islands accessible by boat. It never loads and doesn't suffer at all for its enormity—in fact, every inch of it is stunning. You don't play this game—you get to know it.

Take the physics applied to a single rope bridge—they're astounding. The patter of Jak's feet on the planks and buoyancy, synchronized with how you move on it and where you are—now imagine applying that to an entire region in which every area harnesses a wealth of gameplay. What's that on the horizon? Where does that road go? How do I get into that chamber or reach that cliff? Such are questions you can ask yourself by simply running a few feet ahead. It's mind boggling!

All the while, the story unfolds as you play it and the people around you know where you're going and where you've been.

Yes, gaming has reached a new high.

If you buy one game this holiday season (wow, so cliché—as unthinkably torturous a fate that would be), it has to be *Jak and Daxter*. Rather than continue my campaign of blatant adulation (I'm sure you get the picture by now), I asked the man himself a few pertinent questions.

Mere hours after going gold with his first creation since *Crash* left home, here's Jason Rubin on *Jak and Daxter*...

DAVE HALVERSON

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶

THE DEVELOPMENT, THE DOG...

Hey, I have a signed copy of *Way of the Warrior*, so don't mess with me! From apartment complex motion capture to millionaire, benchmark gamemakers. Was this always the plan? Has your commitment to excellence brought you guys here or is there a little fate involved?

I think that everyone hopes to make it big, and certainly we spend a lot of time at Naughty Dog planning and predicting the future. Six years ago, everyone thought we were crazy to bet on PlayStation. But our predictions that it would succeed gave us a leg up on many other developers of the day who came to the system late. Two years ago, everyone said we were insane to double down on PlayStation 2. We had been very vocal with our predictions of its success in the face of the Xbox. But with the information we have today, I think a lot of developers are wishing that they had listened. At the same time, I think it would be naïve to think that we succeeded without the help of others—most specifically Sony Computer Entertainment worldwide—and of course, a lot of luck. Having said that, everyone at Naughty Dog has worked their tails off for the last seven years (yes, it has been seven since *Crash 1* started!). So everything collided to create the perfect storm.

Tell us about the *Jak and Daxter* team. Anyone new on board since *CTR*?

CTR was done with a team of 16-18. *Jak and Daxter* took the combined effort of 36 people, so we have a lot of new faces. Although every department has grown, our biggest growth has been in the Animation Department. The forty minutes of animation in *Jak and Daxter* took the full-time efforts of six animators, and the additional support of another four. Many of the new faces come from outside the game industry—Disney, Nickelodeon, etc.—but we also have animators who have been with Naughty Dog since the early Crash days. All told, taking both personnel increases and the increased production schedule, *Jak and Daxter* is more than three times the manpower effort of our biggest Crash game!

I remember, as you were buttoning up *Crash Team Racing*, you mentioned that you had an amazing concept for your first PS2 game. Is this what you had in mind?

The first programmers who worked on *Jak and Daxter* started at the same time that *CTR* started. So the early engine work and production design happened simultaneously. *CTR* seems like distant history now, so you can imagine how long some of us have been working on *Jak and Daxter*. Some of the same ideas that went into the engine that drove *CTR* are implemented in the *Jak and Daxter* engine. And to answer your question, we were hard at work on *Jak and Daxter* by the time we were finishing *CTR*, so we already had prototype levels running when we spoke to you then.

Now that hardware constraints are beginning to fade, has game development entered a new era?

There will always be hardware constraints. We can't wait for PlayStation 6 to get here. By the time it does, we will be looking forward to PlayStation 10. Having said that, I do believe that we have entered a new era in game design. We felt somewhat constrained by the original PlayStation, and for that reason, Naughty Dog never attempted free roaming gameplay or a single world. Looking back, I have that much more respect for Insomniac and the Spyro games and what they managed to achieve. PlayStation 2, on the other hand, has given us the ability to do more of what we wanted to do in the last generation. Now we are restricted more by time than by ability. And finally, we have the single world and the open gameplay that we have wanted to do for years.

Having become one of the world's premiere game developers—and of only a couple actually revered in Japan—what's the anticipation like now that you've finished your first original game since *Crash*?

I think that there is a good deal of anticipation for *Jak and Daxter*. I don't know about being 'one of the world's premiere game developers,' but I do know that many people liked the Crash series and I think that they are looking forward to seeing what Naughty Dog can do when our gloves come off. If we were making another Crash game, they would be less excited because they would know that we were restrained by a history of gameplay and design choices created for the PSone. But with a new title in the works, on a new hardware with incredible capabilities and no historic boundaries restricting us, I think they expect something a lot more revolutionary, while at the same time, familiar and comfortable because it is a Naughty Dog game. Just as that excites us, I think it excites Crash fans.

How much committee is there when it comes to the different aspects of a game, like genre, difficulty level, age demographics, development time, etc? Do you focus test or just run with a concept?

Generally Dan Arey and Evan Wells, our designers, run free. Sometimes, the team will ask for a change, but most of the time we implement what they have designed. Once it is implemented, we do a significant amount of focus testing and often tune the design to better suit the gamer. We have restructured entire levels in *Jak and Daxter* because the focus testers didn't 'get it.' In the end, we hope that we have the novelty created by letting designers run free, but at the same time we have a smooth game without frustration spikes. Looking back at our past titles, in my opinion, *Crash 1* was too freely designed and, therefore, somewhat frustrating (especially the level 'High Road' which was mine? doh), *Crash 2* was too tested and structured, and therefore a bit dull, and *Crash WARPED* finally hit the mix just right. Hopefully, we have learned from the past and *Jak and Daxter* can pickup with *Crash WARPED*'s balance.

Did you, at any time, re-work any part of your original concept due to either finding more or less in the PS2 tool kit.

Believe it or not, we added more to the game as we got better at the PlayStation 2 hardware. Around the time that *CTR* finished, we had an 'area' (which didn't make it into the final game) that barely fit in the engine's capacity at 60fps. There were no water effects at the time, no particles, no real-time shadows, no time of day, etc. We said at the time: 'No level can be bigger or more complex than this one, because our engine cannot handle it.' By the time we were done rewriting the engine (often multiple times), that level took less than 50% of what we allotted to the engine, even after we added the effects I mentioned above. That meant that the game could have more enemies, bigger vistas and better challenges. I do love our coders!

Two things Naughty Dog has always strived for—no clipping and no loading (thank you). You must have played a lot of *Daytona* on Saturn! How would *Jak and Daxter* be different if you divided it into smaller sections by stopping and loading? I ask that ever so thankful that you didn't—but what if?

We never contemplated that game. We have wanted to make a single, load-free world since *Crash 1* was completed. Our coders have always managed some of the fastest load times in the industry (never more than eight seconds on the PSone), but we could never get truly load-free on the PSone because of the hardware restrictions. We grew up on cartridge titles, and though we love the extra data space that CDs and DVDs provide, we were never comfortable with the break in the action. I understand that the new Crash game has load times that are often as long as the level takes to play. That is unacceptable in my book. I think as load-free games like *Jak and Daxter* become more prevalent, the gamer will vote with their wallet and all games will have to pay attention to their load times.

What was your biggest challenge in creating this new breed of game and what do we call it? Is it an action, platform, adventure, racing, shooting, riding, puzzle solving, role-playing game? I think you need something shorter. Maybe just call it...Naughty!

Jak and Daxter is an 'action/adventure game.' We very deliberately married the kind of gameplay in 'action games' such as *Crash*, *Mario* and *Spyro* with the exploration elements found in 'adventure games' such as *Zelda*. The fact that

Jak and Daxter has racing, puzzle-solving and the like in it is natural, because *Crash* and *Spyro* both had racing, and *Zelda* had puzzle-solving. We tried not to have many 'role-playing' elements in the game because we didn't want to slow down the action or overemphasize character growth through hit points, experience and the like.

How do you handle this type of development since there is really just one gargantuan level? Do you start at one end and button up as you go? And how do you account for all the possible AI schemes in reference to the order you help or don't help the villagers? It must be a daunting task, to say the least.

Creation of a single world is significantly harder than the cumulative difficulty of creating many levels. Beyond the seemingly simple—but actually nightmarish merging issues like joining the collision, background geometry and occlusion—there are other major issues to tackle. Allocating appropriate 'blocks' for loading, for example, is a massive undertaking. In fact, as I write this, I am in Paris after giving a presentation in Copenhagen at a 3D conference on that very topic. We also had to create a real-time sky that is generated by the PS2 on the fly to allow us to change time of day, cloudiness, lighting and weather smoothly. Then there are issues of cross-level game coding like the 'power-beam' that stays on between the first village and the Jungle and is visible from other areas as well. All of that has to be in memory and be active at all times. But even if we had only built a level-based game, there still would have been issues. At three to six million polygons per area, we would bust Maya on the best PCs money can buy. You basically can't load and work on an entire area with the current tools available. So we had to build using proxy's and references.

That was a major challenge for the modelers. It is kind of like building a ship in a bottle.

Jak and Daxter together are pretty high poly count models, and they animate brilliantly—even when riding (The big, gorgeous bird—I forgot his name and my game's at home). You've got the three of them, ten or so swamp rats, hills, scaffolding, water and foliage that's actually moving, and you're spinning the screen like a top. How? Where's the give and take? Do you have a PS3 development kit or what?

We are pushing a lot of polygons on the PS2. I would have to write a page-long answer to break down each of the separate engines and systems that we have incorporated, after three years of development and refinement, to allow us to do what we are doing. I don't often make superlative statements, but I am confident that the Jak and Daxter engine is one of the most—if not the most—complicated engines ever written for a videogame. For example, two of the five basic background engines do a super fast, smooth morphing to make a single four-sided polygon in the distance 32 polygons when it is close. A smooth sphere in your face, therefore, might actually be a cube at 200 yards. So 10 to million actual polygons a second looks like far more. Without the morphing, it could be over 100 million that would have to be drawn to make the same scene. Yet the engine does this without the standard pops and flickers that reveal the trick. Everyone at Naughty Dog is responsible in some way. The coders made a kick ass engine, and the character and background modelers are experts at using just enough polygons—never being wasteful. By the way, when Jak, Daxter and the Flut Flut are together, we don't switch to lower resolution models. The three combined are almost 5,000 polygons, many of

'You could call it an action, role-playing, platforming, racing, exploration, flying, problem solving, shooter—but that's a lot to remember'

'I've been hearing about 'the reinvention of gaming as we know it' since the first polygon, and now I'm finally seeing it—all of it, all the time.'

which are environment mapped. At 60fps, that's 300,000 polygons a second for the hero alone!

Most games that appear to be vast achieve it by lining the outer regions with flat surfaces and blurry textures. *Jak and Daxter* looks to be comprised of thousands and thousands of uniquely shaped boulders. Did you essentially stack them?

We refused to use the 'height map' techniques that many other games are using today. Basically, those worlds are just extrusions of a flat plane, with little detail besides a few trees and rocks thrown in for effect. It's fast, efficient and easy to model, but it doesn't look natural. Everything in *Jak and Daxter* is hand-modeled without shortcuts. So yes, the modelers created a bunch of boulders and then they went in and painstakingly built walls and landmasses out of them.

What do you do when you're not doing what you do?

We will all be taking December off, but I don't know what I will be doing personally. Many of us will sleep!

THE GAME...

***Jak and Daxter* is pure magic and it's unlike anything that came before it. Who's idea was this, when did you cook it up and which one said to the other, 'Are you nuts!'**

Thank you. Hearing that makes the last two years (three for some of us) worthwhile! The ideas for the elements that became *Jak and Daxter* can only fairly be credited to the whole team. Everyone that contributed work as well as ideas. And we are nuts.

What was your inspiration for the characters?

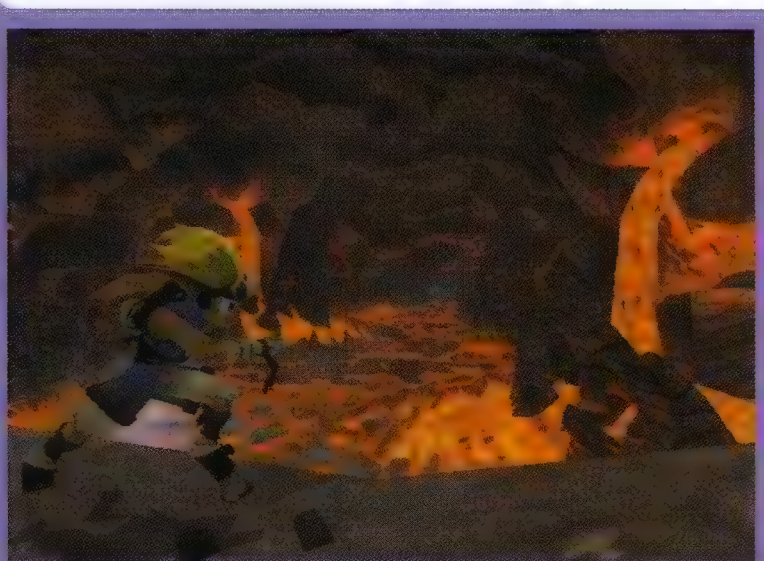
And the story...Dark Eco, Precursor Orbs, crazed Sages, sexy lasses that build cool stuff to ride, Zoomers, giant robots and a human rodent...How long (and how many Red Bulls) did it take to flesh out?

We were inspired by many sources, but the following comes to mind. Certainly the likes of Disney and Warner Brothers cartoons continue to inspire us as they did in the Crash days. The main character interaction, a strong, silent hero and a wacky sidekick bring the world to life and bring a lot of personality to the gaming experience, much like Aladdin and the Genie or Mulan and Mushu did for the big screen. The character design is a combination of eastern and western styles. Oh yeah, we're all big fans of the *Battle Chasers* series of comics and Miyazaki-san's movies and manga like *Nausicaa* and *Princess Mononoke*. And, the idyllic village setting, intriguing and yet familiar residents and quest setup were inspired by the works of Goscinny and Uderzo with the *Asterix and Obelix* series of French comics (a must read!). We have U.S., Japanese and European influences.

One of the many things that I love about your characters is that they are slope sensitive, in that when they're standing on an incline their feet don't melt into the ground. How hard is this to achieve and why do most developers ignore it?

Although we certainly aren't doing a perfect job, we do attempt to lock our character's feet to the ground so he doesn't look like he is floating or sliding. And, to be honest, we do it in a way that is amazingly simple. Most developers have ignored it in the past because the hardware of the past made it too expensive to be worthwhile. Now that we have the power, we feel that it is worth it to spend a little on attaching our character to the world.

Another amazing aspect of the game: After you kill a boss, it not only



stays put, but...it has collision...good collision. You can bounce on 'em for God's sake! This is f'n stupendous. I don't have a question here, that's just really cool.

Ok, I don't have an answer then!

From the get go, one thing is clear. You take your voice actors very seriously (care to dub some anime?). The cast in the game are all represented brilliantly (I love the swamp hick). Did you hire professional actors?

We hired the best people to play the parts based on multiple casting calls. In some cases, we ended up with name talent—in others we got unknown people with stupendous voices. In all cases, they were professional voice actors with multiple jobs under their belt. Some of the names: Max Casella played Daxter, and did an incredible job, and Dee Snider of Twisted Sister was the voice of Gol Alcheron. All together, we had 126 voice actors involved in the game for the six languages.

Can you please make Keira playable next time?

What type of 'play?' Remember, we make games for all ages!

This is the closest thing to a real world environment we're ever going to get without climbing into the tube, and now with flat screens we can forget about that. That said, at least until the next wave of hardware, which I pray is at least five years off, how on Earth are you going to top this? Or will you jump into the sequel?

Most people think of hardware like an empty glass. They think you fill the glass until it overflows and that's all you can do with it. But this analogy doesn't really fit. The PlayStation 2 may be like a glass today and, certainly, we are using 100 percent of what it handles today—but time and technology will allow us to make our code faster, better and smaller. So in effect, the glass just keeps getting bigger over time. Next game, what filled the PlayStation 2 in this game will only fill 60-80 percent of the capabilities in the next iteration. When we work on our third PlayStation 2 game, we will look back and say 'I can't believe we only got that much out of the system on *Jak and Daxter*!' The same thing happened with the PSone. We never thought we would be capable of making a game like *CTR* when we were working on *Crash 1*. So I am sure we will be able to come up with something new to impress you.

How hard would it be to keep building on a game like this and offering new bits via download? Do you think that is the ultimate goal? How much could you build and button up in a six-month period—or am I nuts?

You are not nuts—and it will happen. But it will be yet another challenge to throw on top of an already challenging design process. The last six months of game development saw 30 to 40 percent of the actual game area added. We get faster and more efficient as the engine settles down and everyone gets used to the tools. Starting today, I think we can do 50 percent of the game in nine months. That is probably enough for a downloadable 'episode.' But the infrastructure isn't there yet. Like I said, it will happen eventually.

What I love most about the game is that you can stop in any given area and just play—watch the sun go down, come up...whatever. It's almost like being a kid again. From now, when anyone asks me to show them what's so great about videogames, I'll show them *Jak and Daxter*. What is your favorite aspect of it? Andy? Jason?

I can't answer for Andy, but one of the things that I like most about the game is that some people can be satisfied—and even drawn into gaming—because they can just explore the world for an hour without having any pressure placed on them. A gamer like you or I will immediately ask, 'What are my tasks and how do I progress?' and the game is set up so that you can leap directly into this mode. You don't even need to get your missions handed to you in most cases; you can just stumble upon them. But for other people who aren't as experienced with action games or who don't play games at all, are satisfied by just wandering around. 'Hey look, he swims!' After 20 minutes of wandering, they will find a Power Cell and get the reward dance. 'That was cool—I want to find another one of those.' And the gamer is born. *Crash* certainly never gave you that experience. And as good as they were as games, *Spyro* and *Mario 64* lacked the visual punch to make wandering truly satisfying (hardware restrictions, of course) for the uninitiated. In many ways, playing *Jak and Daxter*, for some people, is like being able to wander around freely in a world like *Shrek*'s.

***Crash* was a monster hit in Japan. Have you crafted *Jak and Daxter* with this in mind and will the import game be any different?**

Because we were working with Sony Computer Entertainment worldwide from the beginning—and with the help of our producers from all three territories—*Jak and Daxter* is even more suitable for the world market, and at the same time the game will be more similar between SKUs. For example, the U.S. version will contain the final French, German, Italian and Spanish translations for the first time.

Who's doing the action figures? Developing the cartoon?

I don't know. Naughty Dog makes games—and the rest will come when it does.

At the end of the game, as an added bonus, can I please kill that f'n fish?!

No. Maybe next game.

What, if anything, do you guys like right now...*Devil May Cry, Maximo, ICO*...What are you playing?

We all like *ICO*. It is simply fabulous. My character modelers are begging to be able to make a game without many enemies…and *ICO* plays so good that I almost want to agree.

Well, once again you've outdone yourselves. But, of course, I am biased. I love jumping, critters, saucer-eyed anything and all things fantastical. What would you say—to our readers—is the ultimate reason to plunk down the cash for *Jak and Daxter*?

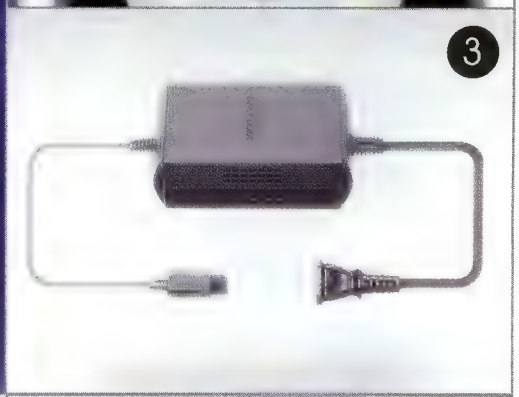
I am confident that character-based game fans will go wild over *Jak and Daxter*. It has the best of action games and the best of adventure games. Hell, it's a character game Reese's peanut butter cup! And even if character games aren't your first choice, then after getting the key title in your favorite genre. *Jak and Daxter* should be your next game choice. Because it *will* get you. That, in essence, is the formula that sold *Crash Bandicoot*. Personally, I think *Jak and Daxter* is as good—if not better—than any of the Crash titles—even *Crash WARPED*.

cubism

Nintendo shows their hand in the next-generation face-off. How does their little, purple machine fare?

HARDWARE

MPU: 485 MHz IBM Power PC "Gekko"
SOUND CHANNELS: 64 CHANNELS ADPCM
SYSTEM LSI: ATI/NINTENDO "Flipper"
MEMORY CARD: 4 MEGABIT, 59 BLOCKS
CONTROLLER PORTS: 4 PROPRIETARY



With every console launch post NES, we have seen Kyoto-based Nintendo late to the party. Their brilliant SNES was released after the Sega Genesis, costing them a rather large chunk of the U.S. gaming market. Then their cartridge-based Nintendo 64 came after not only the CD-based Sega Saturn, but the hugely successful CD-based Sony PlayStation, again costing them not a small amount of market share and a number of third parties. And now, with the GameCube, Nintendo is again the last to release its latest generation of machine, coming seemingly eons after the dominating PS2 and mere days after Microsoft's virginal effort, the Xbox.

Why does Nintendo continue to do this? More than anything, it seems to indicate an enormous amount of confidence as if the company could care less what the rest of the market is doing. Indeed, Nintendo seems almost to exist in a bubble of their own creation, always going their own, distinct way. But it is this very quality that, at its heart, endears them to so many. Nintendo consoles are always unique—they have the feeling of a high quality toy from a future immaculately engineered. And Nintendo always has its ace card of being the finest first party software developer in the world, thanks in no small part to the efforts of Mr. Miyamoto and his talented teams.

Which brings us to the GameCube. Most striking is its diminutive size, allowed by its unique software carrier, an absolutely miniscule-looking, three-inch DVD format. True to form, the system looks like a toy next to the PS2 and the gargantuan Xbox, but of course, therein lies the appeal. It's playful and inviting—not cold and austere. It's a game system—a game system which also happens to boast what is perhaps the best controller ever designed. An absolute joy to hold and manipulate, the GameCube's initially small-looking pad is so comfortable and so perfectly formed to its function, it's fun to just sit and twiddle with the thing without even playing a game. One cannot say the same for the monstrous Xbox pad or Dual Shock.

What is inside the GameCube is still a little bit of a mystery, however. We've got a pretty good idea of what the PS2 can do—which is quite a lot—as games like *Devil May Cry* have proven. But thus far, as with all new hardware, the limits of the GameCube haven't yet been touched. Rest assured, however, that this is a capable system, one which will, as always, have a few, unique tricks of its own. One of these is already evident in the quick load times of the games we've seen thus far. *Luigi's Mansion*, for example, never, ever sits there and loads; and *Wave Race: Blue Storm* loads each level in a matter of seconds. It's the closest that any disc-based system has felt to a good, old-fashioned cartridge machine. Surely, this was the idea.

TIMOTHY PIKE

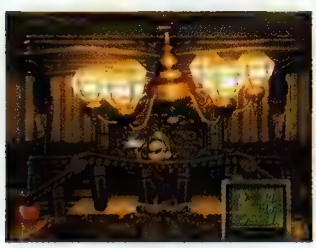
1) The perfect controller 2) The perfect controller, wireless 3) Inline AC adaptor 4) 59- block memory card unit 5) 56k modem

SOFTWARE

LUIGI'S MANSION
WAVE RACE BLUE STORM
SUPER MONKEY BALL
ASSORTED PREVIEWS

LUIGI'S MANSION

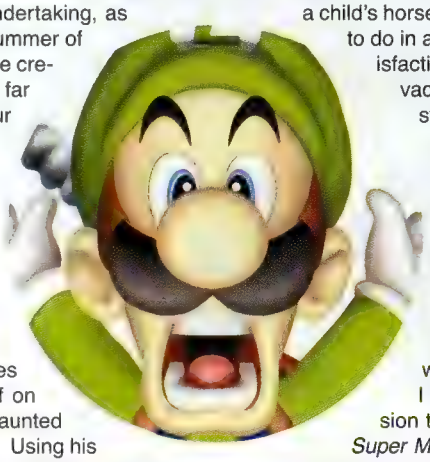
DEVELOPER: NINTENDO, PUBLISHER: NINTENDO, AVAILABLE: LAUNCH



The most pressing question must be this: "Is *Luigi's Mansion* the equal of *Super Mario 64*?" The answer is a very simple, "No." *Super Mario 64* is arguably one of the finest games ever made, so is it a surprise that *Luigi's Mansion* is not? Not really. Creating the first *Mario* game of this new generation is evidently quite an undertaking, as *Mario Sunshine* will not be ready until summer of 2002. As such, *Luigi's Mansion* had to be created on a far tighter time table and is a far less ambitious game with a sub-ten-hour length.

So is it any good? Of course it is. Just bear in mind that this is a very simple game, so simple, in fact, that it prompted some to say upon first seeing it, "That's it?" "Well, yes," I had to reply. But after about ten minutes of play, these nay-sayers were complaining no more.

As has been written countless times before, *Luigi's Mansion* is a straight riff on *Ghostbusters*, with Luigi searching a haunted mansion seeking his lost brother, Mario. Using his backpack vacuum, Luigi sucks up the offending ghosts while making his way from room to room. This, in a nutshell, is the game. Simple, yes? But where it gets clever is in the way you catch these ghosts, for before you can suck them up, first you must scare them. With most ghosts, you simply shine your flashlight in their face, stunning them for an instant while you activate your vacuum and suck them in while they pull you around the room. However, for the various room bosses which litter the game, you must do more than shine your light in their face. Often, you will need to manipulate the environment with your vacuum. You may need to draw a set of curtains, or rock a child's horse back and forth. All of these things are fun to do in and of themselves, and there is a great satisfaction in fighting with the ghosts, whipping the vacuum stream around with the yellow analog stick as you wear them down.



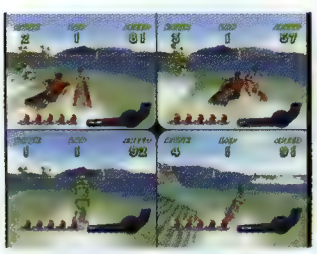
As for *Luigi*'s graphics, they are quite good. Not awe-inspiring, but like the game itself, they are simple and well executed. The ghosts have a marvelously rounded translucence to them and Luigi is perfectly rendered: He's all soft forms and pure expression, and he has a completely endearing habit of humming along the music when he's scared and whistling when there is no apparent danger.

I love *Luigi's Mansion*, but I'm under no illusion that it is going to move systems as well as *Super Mario 64* did. We've already seen evidence of this in Japan—where the system didn't even sell out as new hardware is expected to—but don't blame poor Luigi for this. He's doing his best to find Mario.

TIMOTHY PIKE

WAVE RACE: BLUE STORM

DEVELOPER: NINTENDO SOFTWARE TECHNOLOGY, PUBLISHER: NINTENDO, AVAILABLE: LAUNCH



The first *Wave Race* was a revelation. Truly unique and thrilling to play, the experience holds up to this day, offering an as yet unmatched sensation of wave physics. In actuality, it's too bad the first *Wave Race* was so good because *Wave Race: Blue Storm* is not quite in the same league.

Certainly, the game looks fantastic on GameCube with its reflective water and big, churning waves. It's just that they've gone in and meddled with the controls to an unnecessary degree. In the first game, all steering was accomplished with the analog stick, with a diagonal movement to cut into the water for sharp turns. This was deeply satisfying. Here, you are asked to use the shoulder buttons for sharp steering, and the diagonal movement is a nearly useless super sharp turn. It's a layer of complexity that is completely unnecessary.

With that said, the game is still quite fun. The courses are great, if too few in number, and the computer AI puts up a stiff challenge at all times. Really though, this should have just been a beautiful version of the first game.

TIMOTHY PIKE

SUPER MONKEY BALL

DEVELOPER: SEGA AMUSEMENT VISION, PUBLISHER: SEGA, AVAILABLE: LAUNCH

Lorper adip endreetum velis niamcorem vulputpat.Lor si blan ulput augiam dolortio

After supplying puzzle freaks with *Chu Chu Rocket*, Sega returns to their creative roots for this challenging, more complex version of *Marble Madness*. Players control their choice of four playful, surprisingly cute monkeys—Gongon, a chubby, Kong-like father figure; Baby, a diaper-wearing infant; Meemee, an adolescent, flower-bearing lass; and Aiai, the hyperactive juvenile. And they do just as the title screams: roll around in a hamster-like monkey ball.

Yet the gameplay takes more mastery than one might expect. Patience is a virtue and perfect timing is a must. Each level becomes increasingly difficult, quickly transitioning from a simplistic, miniature golf runway to a curvy roller coaster of skill. Motionless platforms abruptly turn into drawbridges. By stage 10, you'll be steering the toggle stick like never before—as subtlety as humanly possible. But there are 100 environments in full—to entertain and/or stress out players. If your monkey fails to navigate each bumpy, winding, twisty course, it plummets from the sky to his doom.

Playfully designed levels are easy on the eyes; and as replay value, Sega has installed three furiously fun mini games: "Monkey Bowling," "Monkey Golf" and "Monkey Billiards," each unlocked using points earned throughout play. Additionally, "Monkey Fight" and "Monkey Racing" supply party mode thrills (but "Monkey Target" is ultimately more agitating than amusing).

Maybe not the most enduring GameCube launch title, *Super Monkey Ball* is still a genuinely entertaining carnival.

JON M GIBSON

COMING

PIKMIN

Miyamoto's gardening fantasy comes to life in this curious action-strategy game. Has he created a new genre or been out in the sun too long. We say the former.

DECEMBER

STARFOX ADVENTURES

This game has come a long way since we last saw it at E3. *Starfox Adventures* now looks like a bona fide Rare game, with luscious visuals and rock solid play.

MARCH 2002

ROGUE LEADER

The best *Star Wars* game of all time? That's what many have called *Rogue Leader*, and from what we've seen and played, we would have to agree.

LAUNCH

RESIDENT EVIL ZERO

Capcom brings their beloved survival horror series exclusively to the GameCube, first with this stunning remake of the original *Resident Evil*.

MARCH 2002

BLOODY HERO

Our world is a dark place, teeming with dark terrors—it needs a hero who is darker still

Terminal Reality, the Austin, Texas-based developer that most recently brought us the exceptional racing game for the Dreamcast and PS2, *4X4 Evolution*, is hard at work on Majesco's first potential franchise for the PS2, Game Cube, and Xbox—*Project Bloodlust*. The last time I can remember someone coming up with a concept this good, I was sitting at CES with Core's Jeremy Smith as he joked about building an adventure game around a shapely vixen with huge breasts. Jeremy knew that if he built her, gamers would come—and boy, did they ever. With Necra, the sexy female lead in *Bloodlust*, we get a similarly attractive lead character. America loves beautiful, dangerous women—we know that—but moreover, Americans have a long-standing fascination with vampires. (I can already imagine the marquee and action figures.)

Although *Bloodlust* isn't slated for release until next Halloween, here's the inside track on what will surely become one of 2002's most anticipated titles.

Let's begin with a loaded question, shall we? What type of an engine will *Bloodlust* be powered by? Are you going for close proximity and high detail, or large open areas with an emphasis on expansiveness? How about the frame rate and camera. I imagine it's third-person...

Terminal Reality: Using a portal-based engine to maximize the details of each environment, the *Bloodlust* engine focuses on high detailed texture and geometry in a close setting. The engine runs at a smooth 60fps because of this technology and other optimizations in environment.

The engine uses a third-person camera following closely behind the hero to bring the action close to the player and show off the highly detailed characters and scenery. The main reason to use this type of view is to emphasize the coolness of the hero. She's a half-vampire with superhuman agility and strength. She carries a dozen weapons strapped to her sides, hips, wrists and back. The player gets to see all of this.

Wouldn't want it any other way. What types of environments does the game take place in?

TR: The action spans the globe. Set in the 1930s, the game pits the player against various pre-war Nazi forces and supernatural creatures in German castles, military facilities in Argentina and the darkest bayous of Louisiana.

I love the smell of dead Nazis in the morning. How about the music—are you thinking more ambient and moody or will it be a constant, more traditional mix?

TR: Ambient and moody. We don't plan on having a 'soundtrack' as such. The musical aspects of the sound will be almost indistinguishable from environmental sounds, binding the auditory experience into a seamless package. Think of the 'music' in *Silent Hill*.

Vampires have always been human chum—and for good reason. They live forever, never gain a pound (must be the diet) and are hyper-sexual. What are you bringing to the table with Necra? Is she all vampire or a hybrid like Blade? What's her story?

TR: Necra is a dhampir born from the unholy union of mortal woman and sinister vampires. She was raised and trained to hunt her own kind by a secret American agency dedicated to saving the world from supernatural evil. She loves her job.

She got her drop-dead good looks from her mother. The rest comes from her father. She's a cruel, unstoppable half-vampire ninja babe with razor-sharp fangs and a deep thirst to match. She rockets headfirst into the murky depths of horror wherever it rears its ugly head—from dank Louisiana swamplands to the ruined halls of an ancient, awakening evil.

She's pretty heavily armed. Why does she need so much firepower?

TR: She doesn't enter a scene heavily armed. She goes in with nothing more than her blades and fangs. She gathers the weapons of her fallen foes not because she has to, but simply because she can. Due to her strength, she can pick up a heavy machine gun that no man could carry and turn it on a room full of soldiers to mow them down. Sometimes a grenade does the job quicker than her blades, especially in large groups. And then there's style: She can chop off a Nazi's arm and snatch his gun from the falling limb and shoot him with it before he starts screaming.

Oh, I like that in a woman. What is your inspiration for the story, characters and gameplay? Have you seen Manga's *Blood: The Last Vampire* yet? Will she be battling humans, the undead or...

TR: Our primary inspirations were Hong Kong action films and their derivatives like *The Matrix* and *Blade*. Kung fu. Gun fu. Fang fu. *Indiana Jones* also played a role in the shaping of the game's story line.

The player will be faced with human enemies (Nazis) and a variety of supernatural monsters. Many of the monsters took inspiration from the xenomorph in *Aliens* and *The Thing*. And we can't discredit the ceaseless inspiration from *A River Runs Through It* (just kidding).

So it's kind of a *Matrix*, *Blade*, *Indy Jones*, *Aliens*, *Thing* thing? Cool. Speaking of franchises, is the game being set up to ultimately become one? If so, be sure to get McFarlane Toys to do the figures—Lara got butchered.

TR: We would love to have action figures, but that'll only happen if the game is very popular. It's our goal to make a game that everyone loves to play first. If they make action figures, movies or any additional

'She can chop off a Nazi's arm and snatch his gun from the falling limb and shoot him with it before he starts screaming.'

merchandise from it, I guess that's a pretty good indication that we succeeded and it will be a nice reward. But first and foremost, we want to make a good game.

Exactly. Does Necra have any costume changes?

TR: The character is still in early development and costume changes are possible—we can guarantee that the character Necra will look very sexy, violent and will be different from anyone you have ever seen.

Will the game carry an 'M' rating (hope so) and if so, why? Sex, nudity, gore...it's all good. Will Necra suck blood?

TR: Hell yes, it's rated 'M.' How else can you have a sexy vampire vixen sucking the lifeblood from the necks of her fallen victims. She swings four-foot-long, scythe-like blades from her wrists. Arms, legs and heads fly when she slices through a room full of enemies. There are very few innocent characters in the game.

I'm officially in love. Following the gruesome nature of games like *Silent Hill* and *Silent Hill 2*, will you push the envelope in terms of horror? Is the game more violent or scary?

TR: The game does tend toward violent more than scary at this time. Parts will certainly be scary. The film *Aliens* teaches good lessons about pacing and action. Tension builds at the right moments and the release is a spectacular payoff, usually accompanied by gallons of blood and ichors. That being said, we're telling a story and producing a entertaining game...any violence that stems from that is logically based on the characters and is not there for excessiveness. This is a dark title that should entertain people drawn to action, horror and fantasy.

Are you going more for item management and riddle solving—like *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill*—or for *Tomb Raider*-esque action? I guess I could just ask you to describe the gameplay…

TR: There will be no riddles. No inventory. Necra uses her blades and guns and skills. The game is all action, really. We really got tired of horrific games that forced you to stop the tension to resource manage items and weapons. In our game, weapons are utilized automatically using a context-sensitive hierarchy. Example: Necra charges into a room full of enemies. She automatically draws her guns. Each aims independently and they lock onto two enemies: one on her left, the other on her right. When the player attacks, Necra fires her guns. As she closes in on one hapless foe, she slaps the guns onto her belt and swings with the wrist-mounted blades (which are far more devastating than bullets, but only work at close range).

The closest you'll come to a riddle is: 'What is the best way to kill all eight of those guys and feed on the ninth before they even know I'm here?' Most of the boss-type characters have certain strengths and weaknesses, so there will be a little thinking involved in attacking them. A player can charge straight ahead and take all the hits and still kill the boss, but there's usually a more effective way if they take in the entire scene.

Mmm-mmm good! Is the *Bloodlust* team the same as *4x4 Evolution*? What else have the key members worked on?

TR: TRI consists of three teams with a core focus on the technology engines of Mark Randel (President/ Founder) and his engine development team:

My team is the Character Team. We made *Nocturne* and *Blair Witch Vol. 1* for the PC.

The Ground Team produced *4x4 Evo* and its sequel for the PC, Dreamcast, Macintosh, PS2, Xbox and GameCube.

The Air Team produced *Fly!* and its sequels for the PC. All teams are capable of sharing resources and technologies, but those specialties are what separate the teams for the most part. However, as TRI grows, the capabilities of some teams will change to reflect a wide variety of vehicular, character and platform style gameplay.

How long do you have to complete the project or is it open-ended?

TR: We are targeting early Fall 2002.

Is it first and foremost a PS2 or Xbox game? Will the two versions be identical?

TR: We're building to Xbox specs, meaning the highest possible resolution on textures and characters. The Xbox will also have bump and specular mapping. To move the game over to the PS2, we'll reduce the size of some of the textures, but the rest of the art will be the same. Because of our portal technology, the amount of data that has to be processed in any given area is relatively slight, so neither console has a great advantage over the other.

Are you doing anything new in terms of technology with the effects?

TR: This game is very action-packed and we didn't want to shy away from showing brutal and bloody conflict amongst Necra and her enemies. In this game, we try new things, like allowing parts severed from enemies' bodies (the parts are not generic "gibs" but actual portions of the body, like an arm or leg). We've already got a basic particle system implemented, but that's just the beginning.

Practically every object in the world (desks, doors, lamps, boilers, torture devices) is dynamic and has at least two states: intact and broken. Grenades and blades tend to shatter and scatter everything in a room.

THE MAGIC OF ICO

An interview with ICO producer **Fumito Ueda**
as told to **Brady Fiechter**

Other than the sword to replace the staff, Ico doesn't pick up any items in the game. This is such a unique approach to game design...What led you to this decision?

FU: Of course, the aspect of 'items' plays an important role in games. However, in order to add depth to the game, we had to look further. We feel that today's games have game systems that are very complex—at times too complex. Our goal was to create a game where players can easily feel involved without necessarily requiring help from a game manual or a strategy guide.

The character designs look almost like they were pencil sketched—very delicate and softly shaded. How did you accomplish this?

FU: This actually happened coincidentally. We didn't aim for this, but it happened along the lines of our pursuit of great expressions.

The look of the game resembles an overexposed film stock. Are you searching for a surreal, mystical look?

FU: Yes, that was exactly what we were aiming for. We thought the best way to express sunlight was to use the effect of overexposed film. This contrast is probably what leads to the effects. The overall image is targeted at a 19th Century Impressionist painting.

Where do the shadowy, ink-like creatures come from? What is their motivation to stalk Ico and the princess?

FU: You will notice the enemy creatures will emerge from a black nest on the ground. The creatures' aim is to capture the heroine and bring her back to the castle for captivation. They chase the boy to prevent that from happening.

What are you trying to accomplish with the game?

FU: Our aim with *ICO* is to create a world of its own within the television screen. We are also aiming for communication without a language and to create a game that gives a storyline through gameplay—maintaining an immersive feel.

Were you inspired by any games in particular when designing *ICO*? There seems to be a little *Tomb Raider* and a lot of the classic *Prince of Persia*.

FU: *Prince of Persia* is one of our favorites, but we also think there is a similarity between *Lemmings* in areas of leading a non-player

character. This is a similarity that was not initially aimed for.

The puzzle elements are deeply involving—so much ground to explore.

FU: Thank you. We are happy to hear that. We wanted to make sure that the puzzles within the game blended in with the total atmosphere of the world we created.

You chose to focus on sound effects instead of using music. What was the reason?

FU: You will notice that in-game background music is minimal. We have only used music in short segments where we thought it would be effective. This enhances the total atmosphere of the game.

When you first set out to design the game, did you have it in mind to guide the princess through the game? Or did you originally just want Ico as the main character?

FU: The heroine was in our plans since day one and was also our main concept. The only difference was that originally the heroine was a little more cooperative.

I really like the fact that the character has no health or weapon pickups—he must use his mind to flee the castle. What was your motivation for this choice?

FU: There are 3 reasons for this. First of all, to keep things simple, we wanted players to use their minds as an item. Second, we also thought that it would be difficult for the player to have to concentrate on their health and also watch out for the heroine. Another way of thinking is that the heroine herself is the player's health. Finally, to give the players the main role, playing as the boy requires you to be stronger than the heroine.

Could you talk about the story?

FU: At a secluded mysterious castle, a young boy who is about to be sacrificed meets an unknown heroine and together they try to escape....The rest is a secret.

How did you achieve such convincing sound effects? They really pull you into the game.

FU: Even if the sound effects, such as footsteps, are great, if the sound of hitting the walls are cheap, it just ruins everything. Therefore, we captured sound recordings in the earlier stages of development to achieve this.

The physics model is very detailed and involving. Did you really concentrate on making the characters feel so real? Did you focus on any unique aspects of design?

FU: The aim was to create an atmosphere that did not belong to one particular country or culture, yet also aimed to be appealing to the mass. We didn't want to over do the details. Instead, we concentrated on making a good match with the background.

They're animation routines are so especially intricate. Can you describe them?

FU: There is a parameter we refer to as the interest level in which there are a number of objects, such as crates, birds, etc in each stage. There is also the A.I. of the heroine, which allows the heroine to move about freely depending upon what its interests are. In terms of character animation, we have calculated as far as the weight balance of when the character's weight is on the right foot or left foot, the direction the character is facing or the range at which a person's chest can turn. We have looked at the anatomy to make sure characters moved like real human beings. Obviously, most of the movement relies heavily on the animation skills, but we really wanted to take this much further.

One of our editors thought *ICO* recalls a similar tone and magical look of the *Panzer Dragoon* series. Any comments on that?

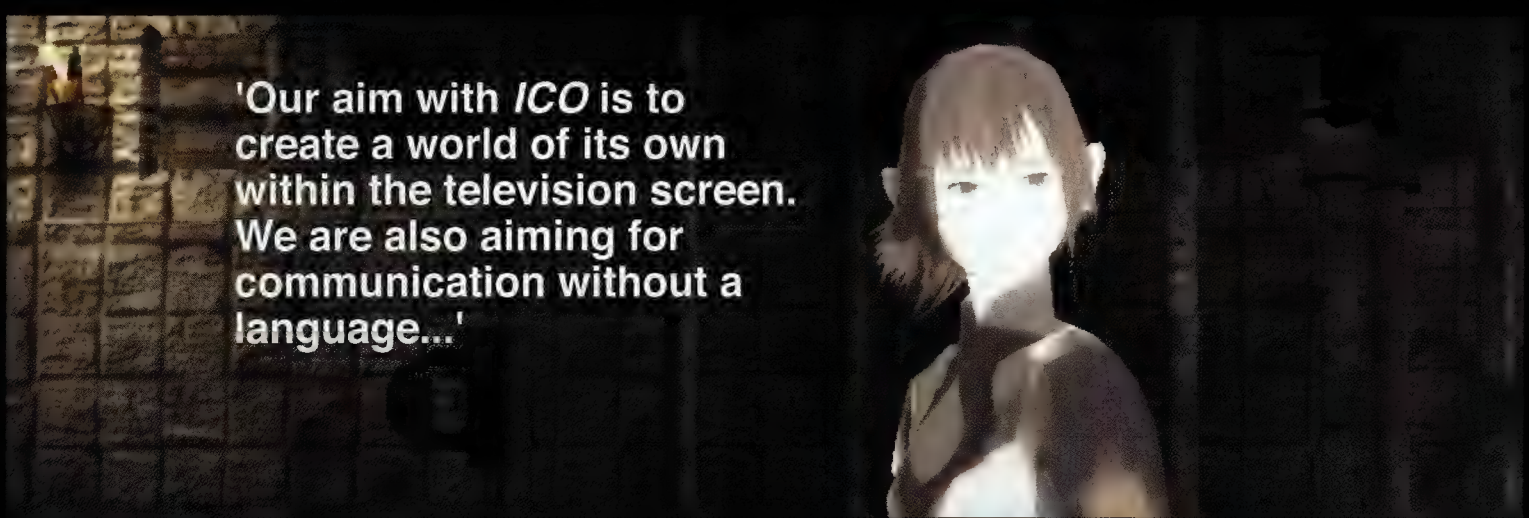
FU: I have never played *Panzer Dragoon*, but feel that *ICO* is more along the lines of a fairy tale.

What was the most difficult part of developing/designing *ICO*?

FU: The A.I. of the heroine was definitely most difficult.

Can you leave us with some closing thoughts?

FU: We are very excited for the launch of the title in the U.S. and we will be following this up with our own launch of *ICO* in Japan. It will be a great pleasure to see the game on store shelves after so much work has been put into it.


'Our aim with *ICO* is to create a world of its own within the television screen. We are also aiming for communication without a language...'

SUPERSONIC

Acclaim Studios Cheltenham talks with us about their supersonic new racer

Interview by Dave Halverson

'As we reached the end of development however the artists just kept coming up with more and more detail that they wanted to see in the levels, so the programmers were challenged right to the last day...'

Images from Extreme-G Gamecube version

First of all, I must congratulate you on one of the most kick ass racing games I have ever seen and played. Anyone with a pulse should wet themselves when they get a load of this one.
[ASC] Thanks very much! We are really proud of the game in the studio and everyone on the team gelled really well, and because they enjoyed working together they pushed each other along and the results really speak for themselves.

***Extreme G* has always been a great concept, held back only by *frame* rate issues. How aware of this were you going in, and how much of a challenge was it to achieve the game's feel while providing a *steady* 60fps?**
[ASC] The number one priority for the team was making sure the game ran at a constant 60fps. Everything built for the game was built to strict budgets, so that we could ensure the game speed was maintained. As we reached the end of development however the artists just kept coming up with more and more detail that they wanted to see in the levels, so the programmers were challenged right to the last day in keeping it at optimal speeds. Fortunately it worked out really well.

What did you take from the old N64 game, and what have you added to bring it up to today's standards?
[ASC] No one on XG3 worked on the previous versions, but Iridiverse was well aware of the predecessors and what worked and didn't. The tracks in XG1 and XG2 were originally built to be a part of the environment, but due to the lower poly counts they couldn't really get this feeling across. What we chose to do was open the environments right up, so that you could look across the world and see the track in the distance, how it was supported, and do seconds later be racing around it. We really wanted people to get the feeling that they were travelling across the landscape, and not just going through tunnels.

The game has an interesting balance between weapon and shield energy usage and air braking. What would you say is the key element to winning in *XG3*? Personally I found the Leech and proper cornering/turbo to be the key.
[ASC] The weapons were always planned as being an integral part of the gameplay, but we also wanted players to choose whether they use them or not. You can succeed by destroying the opposition or depleting their shields, but you have to know the tracks first. The key for me is learning the route around each of the circuits before trying to master the weapons as well. Air braking becomes essential with the faster bikes and timing it correctly is key so that you don't lose too much speed on the bends.
The Mech is a great strategic weapon as it hurts the opposition while benefiting you, a double win so definitely a great choice (although I am partial to a little target practice with the rail-gun, I just love the damage it causes!)

The Sonic boom is one of the coolest features in all of racing. The sense of breaking the sound barrier is uncanny. How difficult was it to achieve this?
[ASC] We did a fair bit of research into real sonic booms, including investigating how they look from a third-person perspective, which is the main camera angle people use. The effect only really came together when we put the audible boom, the visual distortion and the deafened soundtrack together and the results are cool!

Between the PS2 and GameCube versions-What is the difference?
[ASC] The game is already really great on PS2 and because there aren't any features that we dropped from the PS2 version we can't add any back in for GameCube! We are currently investigating a four-player mode, which we'll include in the game if we feel it does the game justice. Also, we'll be revising a number of the visual effects so that we can take full advantage of the Gamecube's hardware.

Is the PS2 as difficult to tame as it's made out to be?
[ASC] From a programmer standpoint you do have to do a fair bit of ground work on the PS2 before you start getting results, but every new piece of hardware has it's own nuances and techniques that you need to learn to get the most of it. Overall the machine is significantly more powerful than the consoles that came before it, and it's been great to be able to properly utilise the hardware in the game. Also, as this is our third PS2 title from Chelfham we've been able to carry a lot of our acquired knowledge forward, so in effect this game has a lot of third generation technology in it.

The game obviously lends itself to TV, action figures etc. Has there been any talk of merchandising?
[ASC] Not until now! But thanks for the idea!

Is there a performance difference between the female (thanks for them by the way [ASC] You're welcome!) and male racers? How about the teams?
[ASC] We have made each of the teams perform differently, so they each have their own style. Some prefer using melee, then getting on a flight, and others will rip in with all their weapons at the first opportunity.
We also make the AI aware of who shot them last, so that they can take this vengeance back out on you in the current or following races. If you're lucky there could be a grudge match between two of the teams which forces you away from getting overtaken.

How big does *XG3* need to be to spawn another sequel, or is it already in the pipeline?
[ASC] When we started we didn't know how the public would take to a new XG game, and especially as it was on a completely different platform. Happy the reception has been phenomenal and there has been some scribbling as to some ideas that would go into a follow-up game if we do one. For the time being we're pretty much planning what we're working on next, and whether XG4 is amongst them, I couldn't possibly say.

What was the total development time for *XG3*?
[ASC] Design work started back in April 2000, and the team ramped up from there, so all told it ran for about 15 months (which is pretty quick!). We did base technology that we developed with our previous games on PS2 so we got a bit of a running start on this front anyway.

What has this team worked on prior and what are you up to next?
[ASC] The team came from a number of games, including *RC Revenge Pro* and *Crazy Taxi* for PS2. We also hired some new people just for the job. The team are currently stuck into *XG* for GameCube full-time, which we'll be finishing in a couple of months time, and then after that we'll be doing something we can't talk about!

Any buried treasure we should know about in *XG3*?
[ASC] Since you asked there are a few hidden extras which we'd like you to discover for yourself but while the programmers were building the resources together for each of the disk cuts they came up with some rare performance figures for the bikes, and raced against the clock on the speed pad. Our current top record is 13.56 seconds (yes Hansen's shit if you fancy your chances just hit this combo anywhere in the frontend: L1, L2, L1, R1, L1, R2, L1, R1, L2, R2 and hold onto your hat!

Interview with **Takayoshi Sato** and **Akihiro Imamura** of *Silent Hill 2*

VIEW TO A KILL

Questions...

1. *Silent Hill* was known for its emotionally disturbing imagery and amazingly nuanced CG. Have you challenged yourself to take your designs to an even higher level of detail and emotion?

2. Do you draw your inspiration from any art, books or film?

3. How do you prepare yourself to create the CG? Do you find you have to be in a certain mood or place mentally to do your best work?

4. Was it a different process working on *Silent Hill 2*? What have you learned from the first game that you applied to this sequel?

5. What is the most challenging part of the creative process?

6. After playing *Silent Hill*, I was intrigued by how emotionally convincing the characters were in the movie sequences. Can you describe how a typical scene is made? Does it take days? Do you approach each scene entirely differently?

7. You made the CG in *Silent Hill* on your own. Are you being assisted this time?

8. I'm sure your work can be quite rewarding. What frustrates you about the creative process?

9. After playing the game, I can honestly say that I have never seen something so disturbing. Was it your goal to make something more frightening than anything before it?

10. Do you ever feel like you've gone too far?

11. Some people at E3 were kind of offended by the CG sequence with the three monsters being watched by a character hiding in a closet. Describe that scene and what you were trying to do.

12. I think it's awesome that you are making such rich, dark, disturbing art. It must be quite satisfying to know that people are talking and admiring what you do?

13. Are any of the character designs patterned after real people?

14. How do you invest such an incredible amount of expression in the characters?

15. What do you want the player to feel when he is watching the CG?

16. Is it more enjoyable creating the CG knowing that it's going to be displayed on the DVD format?

17. Do you feel limited at all in what your doing? It seems that technology has gotten to a point that you are almost limitless in what your imagination desires.

18. When you aren't working on the game, what keeps you entertained? Any special hobbies or interests?

19. It seems like you want to give the player nightmares! Do you ever get nightmares from your own work?

20. Tell us a little bit about yourself—your background, how you got started. And what makes you tick?

21. So now that the long, creative process has come to an end, how do you feel? What's next? A long vacation?

'...before a new project, I usually try to increase my body weight by 20-30 pounds. I usually lose the weight by the time the project ends...I don't usually have time to go out and eat every day...' -Takayoshi Sato

...and answers, from Takayoshi Sato, Director of CG works, *Silent Hill 2*

1. The CG design for *Silent Hill 2* focused on making the character expressions and emotions much stronger while enhancing the environment around them (i.e. lighting effects, shadows, fog, etc.). This attention to detail on the characters increased the overall atmosphere and mood of the game. As a result, the player enjoys a much deeper storyline.

2. In addition to being a CG artist for Konami, my background is heavily trained in Fine Arts. When creating the imagery for *Silent Hill 2*, my inspiration came from many different people. For example, Andrew Wyeth, Francis Bacon, Rembrandt Harmensz, David Lynch, Stanley Kubrick, Andrei Tarkovsky.

3. I always wanted to have a few days to myself before starting a project where I could relax in a beautiful area—such as Kyoto—and not think about anything related to work. However, I never get to have this opportunity. It is the Konami way. Actually, before a new project, I usually try to increase my body weight by 20-30 pounds. I usually lose the weight by the time the project ends—I don't usually have time to go out and eat every day during the project.

4. In *Silent Hill 2*, a lot of the same techniques that were used in the previous game were also used in the sequel. However, I wanted the quality and accuracy of the CG to improve, so I spent a considerable amount of time studying and observing humans in other countries, especially America. In the first game, I was somewhat limited to studying Japanese body movements and facial expressions. In the sequel, I completed the CG work in America where I had the opportunity to view all types of people from various ethnicities with different body frames. In addition, I reviewed motion capture data of real-live human actors to see exactly how the body reacted to movements in the arms, legs, face, mouth, etc. I did not use any of the motion capture data to create the CG sequences in *Silent Hill 2*, but being able to watch the body move with motion capture sensors, I was able to make very subtle adjustments to the CG animation, enhancing the overall accuracy of the character movements.

5. The most challenging part of designing the CG sequences in the game is matching the actual speech dialog between characters with their facial expressions.

6. On this project, we did not do any pre-production planning, such as storyboards or rough sketches, mostly because of short production timelines to complete the game. Instead, we immediately began building the scenes and would make running changes and adjustments as we continued forward. Generally speaking, a 30-second CG sequence needs about 2-3 weeks to complete from start to finish, including rendering time.

7. Yes. This time around I have a team of three artists that have worked on various CG sequences in the game. However, the team was formed over time, so in the beginning, it was still only me on the project. Fortunately, I found the right people as the project got closer to completion.

8. The most frustrating thing for me is anything that blocks the creative process from happening. For example, on this project, the biggest obstacle was financial resources. Because great creative talent comes at a high price, it was difficult to get the right team in place based on the resources available to me. On top of that, it was also difficult to purchase the highest quality computers that were needed to handle the complex tasks of rendering CG sequences. In the end, we managed to complete the project on time.

9. We are not trying to make *Silent Hill 2* more scary or frightening than *Silent Hill* or any other game out there. Our goal on this project is to create a great game with a deep and emotional storyline that is still within the horror genre of games.

10. I don't think so. I'm sure we can all think of more disturbing images in our own minds.

11. We wanted to create a scene where James witnessed something very bizarre and strange. We decided that it was most appropriate to have James hiding behind a closet while watching some of the monsters have fun playing together.

12. Is this true? If so, I am very happy.

13. Various body parts have been based off of features of real people, but there is no character in the game that is designed to look like a real person.

14. Each character in *Silent Hill 2* is very different and there is no specific method to creating the expressions of each character. In general, I have studied all the muscles and bones in the body from my classic art background. This knowledge has helped me create CG characters that move and react in a believable or life-like way.

15. I want the player to feel the emotions and atmosphere that the characters are experiencing in each scene. I also want the CG to leave a lasting impression and memory on the player.

16. The DVD format makes it possible for us to do higher quality CG scenes that run at 60 frames per second.

17. Even though technology has enabled us to do limitless possibilities with CG, we are still limited by real-world elements, such as money, time and manpower.

18. I enjoy riding motorcycles and karate. Some day, I will make a motorcycle or karate game.

19. I don't wish for anyone to get nightmares from playing *Silent Hill 2*, but I do want players to indulge themselves in the world and atmosphere of the town. I hope they get scared and confront fears, but hopefully they will not have nightmares. As for myself, I don't get nightmares from working on *Silent Hill 2* because I sleep so deeply. If I didn't work all-night long on *Silent Hill 2*, maybe I'd sleep less deeply and experience nightmares.

20. My background is fine arts and I found out that it is very difficult to make a living in the real-world as a traditional artist. Rather than spending my own money to create my own work, it is so much nicer when someone else pays for it.

I got started at Konami after they had distributed employment flyers around my art school. I sent in some pictures of my artwork and then I got the job. That was back in 1996 and I have worked for them ever since.

My first project at Konami was for the arcade conversion of *Sexy Parodius* to PlayStation and Sega Saturn. I was a 2D artist/illustrator at the time. I had to work every night and holiday on this project and it was very tough. I decided that I needed to study newer skills that would be used in future videogames. It was always my dream to create movies and scenes with actors/actresses but it is so expensive to produce. However, I can achieve the same goals with creating scenes and developing characters in CG design. As a CG artist, I can direct characters exactly the way I want them to behave without hearing them whine or yell. I have total control over the scenario design, which is much more freedom than a production team member would have on a real movie set.

I believe that artwork should challenge people to look at their own views and beliefs, while opening their minds to new ideas and philosophies from different cultural points of view. I always keep this thought in my mind whenever I create new material.

21. I feel relieved that the *Silent Hill 2* has finished. I really want to take a vacation, but it seems that I will not be able to enjoy some time away from work. There are more projects that must start soon, so it looks like I will be working forever.

Questions...

1. Going back to the original game, what inspired you to create *Silent Hill*? Had you always wanted to create such a graphic, disturbing video game?

2. Have you found the making of this sequel a similar process?

3. Of course, the PlayStation 2 frees you to do much more creatively. What can we see in *Silent Hill 2* that just wasn't possible before?

4. Do you ever have to say, 'I've gone too far; this is too graphic?'

5. You obviously want to frighten us as we play.

6. What are the similarities in story and theme to *Silent Hill*?

7. Is the gameplay essentially the same?

8. What is it like making such an anticipated game? Are you excited to hear what people will say about this sequel?

9. Were there moments of frustration when you felt limited in what you wanted to accomplish?

10. Do you have any outside influences?

11. In *Silent Hill*, the radio noise and directional sound effects played a huge part in the experience. Can you describe how you focused on the sound in *Silent Hill 2*? Did you utilize the advanced capabilities of the PlayStation 2?

12. What kind of monsters will be fought in the game? They look genuinely horrible.

13. What's a typical day like for you? Or is every day a bit different from the last?

14. Is it hard to relax when your on a big project like this? Are you constantly thinking about the game?

15. How does making this game compare to *Silent Hill*?

16. For those of us who were giant fans of *Silent Hill*, what can we expect out of *Silent Hill 2*?

17. The music is haunting! Did you allow your musician full freedom to compose? How much input did you give?

18. Did you ever consider removing the fog effect in *Silent Hill 2*? It adds so much to the atmosphere.

19. The detail on the monsters and character is extraordinary...

20. What do you want the player to feel when he's in the world of *Silent Hill*?

21. Will there be lots of surprises in this sequel for fans of the original?

22. As an artist, you must always push yourself to greater and better things. What were some of the frustrations in creating the game? Anything you just couldn't do?

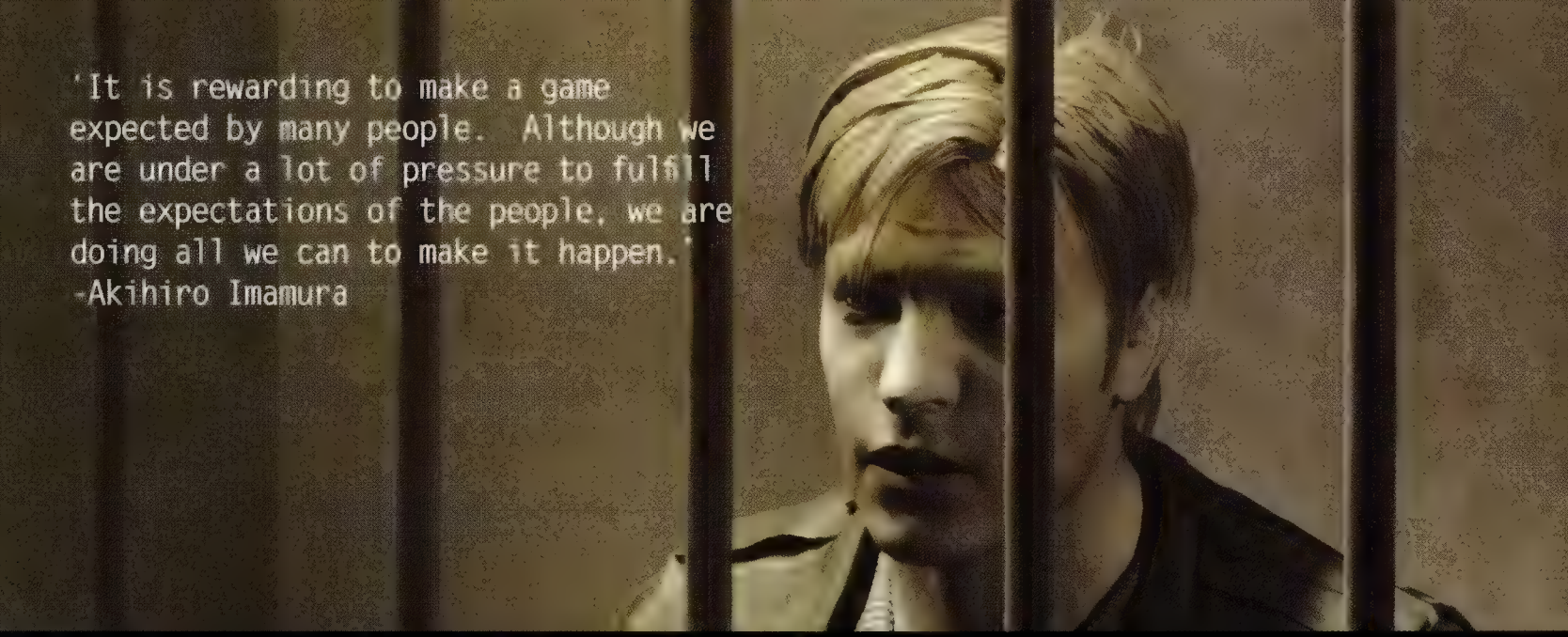
23. And what was the most rewarding aspect of making *Silent Hill 2*?

24. Did you always have this sequel in mind when you made *Silent Hill*?

25. If there is one thing you could tell fans of your series, what would it be?

26. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

27. What inspires you to create such a frightening game?


'It is rewarding to make a game expected by many people. Although we are under a lot of pressure to fulfill the expectations of the people, we are doing all we can to make it happen.'
-Akihiro Imamura

...and answers, from Akihiro Imamura, Producer, *Silent Hill 2*

1. Many kinds of inspirations led us to create a prototype of *Silent Hill*. First, we began the creation by seeking reality of the game world. As a result [of the realism we achieved], this is why it became this kind of disturbing game.

2. Yes. However, we had to almost triple the workforce in this sequel...

3. For example, we now make many kinds of new visual expressions, such as fog, which makes you feel that the wind is actually blowing; or shadow, which is effected by lighting sources, etc. At the same time, the storyline is as polished as the graphics.

4. Not really, since we are always striving for the greatest content.

5. Yes. However, frightening you is just the purpose on the surface. The real purpose is to convey the theme that is in the storyline.

6. Although the storyline is completely different, the eeriness of the town is common between the first and second *Silent Hill*.

7. Overall, it is same, but we made some modifications so that you can play the game easier.

8. It is rewarding to make a game expected by many people. Although we are under a lot of pressure to fulfill the expectations of the people, we are doing all we can to make it happen.

9. Yes, there were. In creating a game, we must face various kinds of limitations. Yet, the important thing is that we need to create the best content within these limitations

10. There are some comic writers and novelists which I like. I suppose they have a great influence on me.

11. The BGM changes the atmosphere gradually—surprising sound effects, and S-force sound—which makes you feel as if something is approaching from behind you, etc. In *Silent Hill 2*, the sound plays a very important role.

12. There are monsters who look human at first glance, but they are not human. Their body movement is beyond our imagination. These kind of monsters appear frequently.

13. In a typical day, [I'm] overwhelmed in terms of my work. However, now it is right before the completion of the development and I spend all of my time—except for sleep—doing game-balance adjustment.

14. I can relax during the very early stage of planning, thinking about the scenario and so on. However, I will be too occupied before the end of the development. I constantly must be thinking about so many things. Furthermore, no matter how busy I am, I always think about content ideas.

15. As in the first *Silent Hill*, we were lucky to have so many talented developers and the development has progressed relatively smoothly.

16. Please look forward to the storyline. Also, please play over and over and discover everything that is in *Silent Hill 2*.

17. As to the music of *Silent Hill*, I give overall freedom to the sound director. Although I convey my ideas whenever I catch any ideas, I do not make detailed directions to him.

18. No. I never thought of it. The fog is indispensable to *Silent Hill*. Without it, there is no way to create the peculiar atmosphere.

19. Thank you. We are putting great effort into it.

20. Please become James and live the game.

21. Since *Silent Hill 2* is a completely different story than the previous one, solutions to the riddles from the first version will not work. However, if you are a fan of the first title, you will find yourself getting into this *Silent Hill 2* as well.

22. My frustration is the lack of development time. I always think that I wish I had more time to create the game, for any game that I get involved with. Yet, I consider that it is a mission of a professional to create the best content within the limited time.

23. So many people have such great expectations for this title that I can actually feel it!

24. When we completed the development of the first one, I never thought of making a sequel at all. However, I began to start thinking of making a sequel around the time of the PlayStation 2 release.

25. This title drags you into a world of nightmares which you cannot feel in ordinary, daily life.

26. I was just a kid who was fond of games in the past. Because of my passion about videogames, now I am involved with game development. There are many hurdles to clear, but I would like to make good games from now on.

27. My own past—especially from my childhood—[are] frightening experiences.

10TH 'FANTASY'

Square plays with the *FF* formula just a bit, but the astounding CG work overshadows it all. Prepare to be amazed.

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER: SQUARE
PUBLISHER: SQUARE
AVAILABLE: FEB 2002

The new, faster battle system of *Final Fantasy X* really draws you into the story—it's awesome.

I've just finished playing about 30 hours into the Japanese version of *Final Fantasy X* and I am—quite literally—overwhelmed. Not so much by the game's play—while fairly well-removed from previous *FF* games doesn't sparkle with that much originality—but by the ease with which Square upped the graphical ante. This game looks so ridiculously good so often, it's amazing to me that it was ever finished. The miraculous CG work, though lacking the micro-detail of the *Final Fantasy* film, is astounding—so colorful and dynamic in its presentation as to leave you breathless.

But while the CG is the purest expression of Square's visual depth of talent, it is the real-time imagery that speaks to the skill of both the engineers and the artists—and, of course, this game is in another league. Only *Devil May Cry* looks better in spots, but when you consider that *FFX* has probably about 10 times the content of that game, its visual achievement is even more stunning. There is a richness here, a vast color palette that completely separates it from every previous *FF*. Some may not like it, but its beauty cannot be denied.

Speaking of things some may not like, I come now to the gameplay. Those expecting a simple tweaking of tried-and-true *FF* play might be put off. The overworld is gone, as is the turn meter, and at any time during battle you can switch your active characters. And then there is the new ability system—the Sphere Board. You no longer earn experience points. Rather you gain sphere points, which are then used to level up and learn abilities by linking different spheres on this massive, interwoven map of skills. It's a slightly convoluted system, but ultimately very satisfying.

Regardless of how you take to these changes, I have little doubt that you will not be disappointed when the game is released early next year. Let's just hope that Square manages to perform some *Metal Gear*-caliber dubbing—otherwise, a bit of this game's magic will be lost.

TIMOTHY PIKE

R'Z ONE

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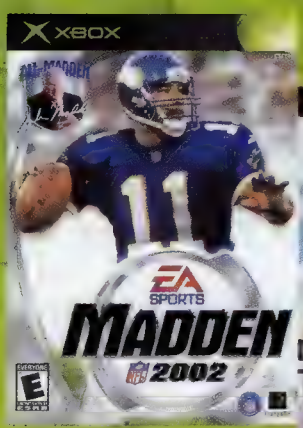
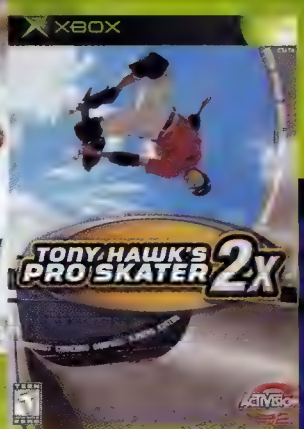
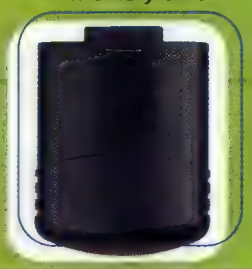
You've never played like this before...





Memory Unit



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TORTURED 'SOUL'

The best things in life—and death—are often worth the wait. Such is the case with *Soul Reaver 2*, Crystal D's epic tale of vampire plight.

Then Kain shot through the time warp—and the game abruptly ended. It was universal—if you played *Soul Reaver*, as enjoyable as it was, you were left mouth agape by its ending. Ahh, but time—indeed—does heal all wounds. When you see what's in store for you on the other side, you'll be glad you were left waiting.

Technology has been kind to Raziel and Kain—to Mobieus and especially Nosgoth. The first time Raziel emerges from the game's initial temple, everything else around you fades away—those waterfalls, that horizon, those textures—and it only gets better from there. The "Z"-Trigger lock-on-style fighting—made famous by *Link's Awakening*—is employed with potent results, the enemy AI has been amplified and the cinemas are nothing short of blessed. The production values at work here are stunning for a videogame. This is *Blood Omen* the game within *Blood Omen* the movie, all wrapped into one bone-chilling package.

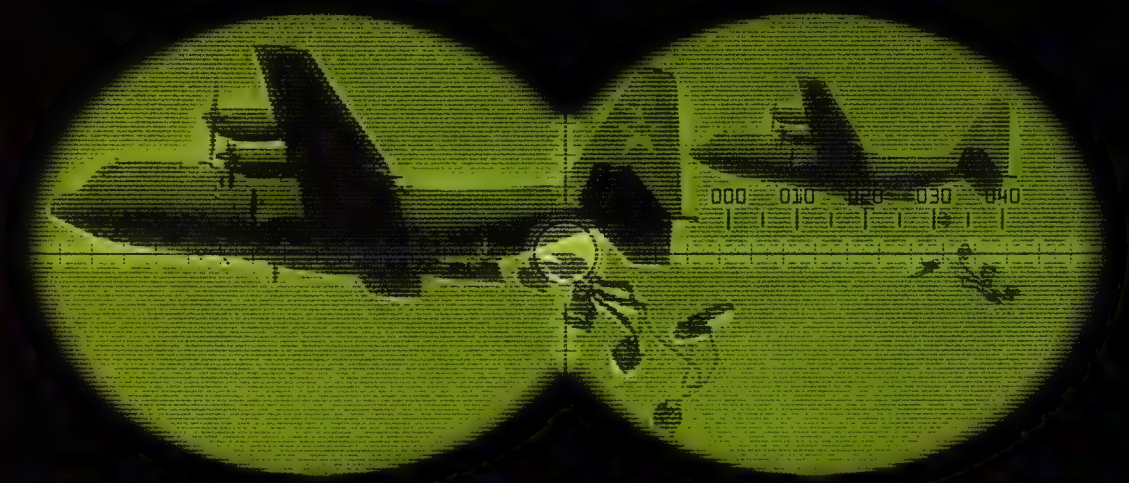
The attention to detail is especially outstanding: Impaled, dying vampires—mere roadside décor—have detail, diversity and animation; motion blurs during key battles exhibit superbly produced effects; the voice acting is perfection; and every last footstep is accompanied by the appropriate audio ripple.

Increasingly, *Soul Reaver 2* is a testament to the storytelling ability of videogames. The gameplay remains as intriguing as always—amplified by the story and visuals—encompassing a range of play styles, including exploration, platforming, fighting, puzzle solving and role-playing. There's not so much block moving or assembly required this time out, but I found that welcome.

Crystal Dynamics' dedication to the franchise, along with Eidos' support, is admirable—from the top-down PlayStation debut of *Legacy of Kain* all the way to the glorious PS2 game quality—and has always been key. A little 128-bit gecko action is definitely in order.

DAVE HALVERSON

PlayStation.2



SMUGGLER'S RUN 2

HOSTILE TERRITORY

The ultimate off-road driving adventure returns to the PlayStation®2 computer entertainment system this fall. Work for an elite band of smugglers delivering contraband, escaping the authorities and attacking rivals. Make the drop, hit the nitro boost and get across the border before all hell breaks loose!

COMING
FALL 2001

www.rockstargames.com/smugglersrun2

Deliver the goods through mine fields, avalanches and enemy crossfire!

Fully integrated plot increases the adrenaline and ups the stakes

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Outrun and outwit your enemies head-to-head in split screen multiplayer mode!

TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB — Violence

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2D TRANSFORMED

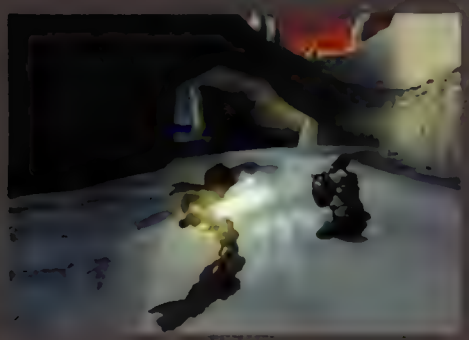
Capcom's *Maximo* is *Ghouls 'n' Ghosts* reinvented. 3D action gaming has a new name. Long live the king.

I'll spare you the prerequisite *Ghosts 'n' Goblins* timeline and cut right to the chase: Alongside *Castlevania* and *Contra*, this is the most beloved 2D franchise in existence. But much to the chagrin of the entire old-school gaming contingent, Konami was less than scrutinizing when it came to 3D incarnations of their two treasures, all but killing them in the process—making the introduction of *Maximo* all the more fulfilling.

To date, this is one of only a few legendary 2D games to actually benefit from its transformation to 3D. It took a veteran producer, a legendary artist, an ultra-talented team and, of course, a company like Capcom to pull it off—but it's finally happened. 3D has passed its incubation stage and reached a point where, if done correctly, it can captivate us as much as our favorite 2D games did—and that is saying a lot. (Of course, if you're new to gaming, you can just skip all of this nonsense and read ahead.)

Capcom seems to care about their characters more than any other company, save maybe Nintendo (although, that new Link—I don't know; and *Metroid* in first-person? The wheels are loosening). They didn't even attempt 3D versions of *Strider* or *Ghouls* on PlayStation or N64—even though they would have earned a huge cash return. Instead, they exported their one franchise that lent itself to such technology—*Mega Man*—that they also continued to support in 2D. Steadfastly, they opted for a 2D *Strider* sequel and created one of the console's most beloved side-scrollers in the process. They have made us wait for what seems like an eternity for a

'*Maximo* is perfection—a five-star action game if there ever was one—and anyone that says otherwise is smoking paint.'



Ghouls 'n' Ghosts follow-up—but I'm glad they did. No—I'm ecstatic.

Maximo is perfection—a five-star action game if there ever was one—and anyone that says otherwise is smoking paint.

Using character designs by famed Famitsu artist Susumu Matsushita, David Siller and company have sculpted every inch of the game with the utmost care and precision. Beyond simply revisiting the gameplay, they have improved upon it, taking elements like rising and sinking terrain, popping open treasure chests for loot and armor and the ever-persistent siege of the undead, and married them to the new framework in a way befitting the legend.

The game is comprised of five massive, circular hubs, teeming with activity and a pant-wetting boss in the center, accompanied by series-inspired music from über game maestro Tommy Tallarico. While playing *Maximo*, the longer you go without taking damage, the more powerful you become as our hero kicks open chests, gradually amassing layers of armor—a simplistic concept made difficult through keen AI schemes and truly treacherous terrain. The addition of certain "locked abilities" like Throw Shield, Mighty Blow, Second Strike and the Midas Shield—which lets you draw in gold coins from a distance—impact how a level is played and the mastery you attain in each. What you get for perfection, should you attain it, is yet to be determined. There are secret paths to unearth, breakaway glass in mausoleums that reveal hidden treasures and—well, way too much other stuff to cover in this preview.

In terms of the enemy AI, they may be undead, but they aren't dumb. Skeletons, zombies, guards, crows, ghosts and assorted goblins all come in different shapes and sizes and all attack in their own specific manner—you can even bait them, drawing them down or up to your level. Downright menacing, they hurl weapons, ambush, steal your shield and gems, and always seem to pop up in the most inconvenient places. Plus, I could speak volumes on the character designs, tilted panoramas and overall architecture—but space doesn't allow.

Maximo is absolutely gorgeous. I especially love the way they've designed the trees. (Hey, when you whack one with your sword, it sticks in the freakin' trunk—how cool is that?)

If you're not convinced by now (heck, if you're not waiting in line by the end of this sentence), tune in next issue for the review and a telling look behind the scenes.

DAVE HALVERSON

CRASH TEST

Travellers Tales and Universal Interactive prove once and for all that you can't keep a good bandicoot down.

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER: TRAVELLERS TALES
PUBLISHER: UNIVERSAL
AVAILABLE: NOW

Sega chose them to uproot Sonic from his 2D roots. Disney tapped them to convert their beloved mouse into a sprite. Now I know why. Travellers Tales are perhaps the ballsiest developers in the industry. Not only do they sublet legendary licensed properties, but they actually have the talent to produce sequels that meet or—in this case—exceed expectations.

When they adapted *Mickey Mouse*, there was no real videogame precedent, and when they fitted Sonic for his isometric and later racing debut, he was in a bit of a slump. But taking on *Crash* is a different story—this bandicoot's on fire, reeling from success after success, both here and abroad. Many speculated that TT would break the mold and redesign the tried-and-true *Crash* formula. However, wisely—I think—they have chosen to construct a big, beautiful new *Crash* adventure, taking all of the game's wonderful nuances and putting a fat exclamation point on each one. Everyone's favorite fruit-eating crate-hater is back—and he's brought his sister Coco, too.

The story, which serves as more of a commercial for the game, has Aku Aku's (yes, the floating mask) brother Uka-Uka teaming with Neo Cortex to spread evil—no surprise there. Uka has liberated five sinister elemental masks to aid him, hoping to harness their destructive energy to power Dr. Cortex's latest super weapon to get the job done. The only way to stop the fiendish masks is by imprisoning them using five ancient crystals. So there you have it—five hubs, five environments, five crystals and five bosses—the *Crash* formula lives!

Once you get on a new pair of shorts after seeing the joy of fixed 3D on the PS2, it's game time! The effects—real-time lighting, reflections, water, moving flora and rain—are superb. And the resolution is as crisp as—well, it's pretty darn crisp. Of course, none of this means squat unless the game rocks, so even if you think you've had all the *Crash* you can stomach, don't worry. The game truly is a marvel.

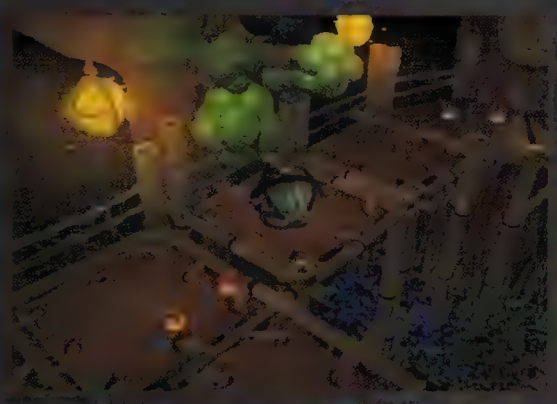
Beyond strategic crate-braking and combo-tastic bouncing maneuvers, TT has added quite a bit to the game's framework. Each time you defeat a boss—and they're pretty tough this time out—Crash earns a new move for his troubles, adding greatly to the game's variety as you delve deeper. The ability to tiptoe over Nitro crates is especially useful, but the Death Tornado Spin—which allows you to spin and float longer—is pretty cool, too. Crash also has a garage (scratch that—secret laboratory) full of new vehicles to operate, most notably a transparent, rolling sphere. Not only is it a great esthetic piece, but the corresponding levels are tweaked to perfection, from the fresh tracks he leaves in the snow to Crash's stellar animation inside the bubble. The Jeep, trudging mech (a la *Aliens*) and submarine are cool too—but nothing beats the heli-pak. This whirling apparatus takes some getting used to, but once you master the controls it's like playing *Pilotwings* with Crash.

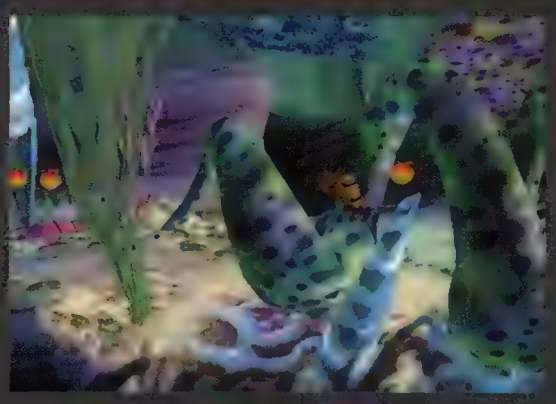
TT has also pumped up the tiresome jungle boogie soundtrack, adding a welcome bit of electronica to the mix, and taken a page from the original in terms of replay value, rewarding players accordingly for braking every crate in each level—which is no small task. The only aspect of *Crash* that could have benefited from a bit more tweaking are the game's emaciated enemies—sporadically tossed into every corridor to make you go *hmmm*. For the most part, they just stand in one place repeating the same predictable routine, seldom attacking as they did so often in the original.

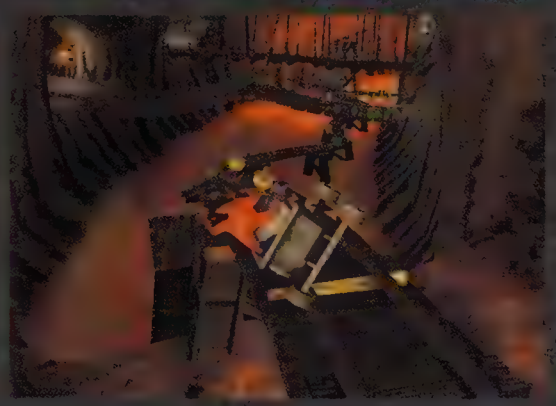
But you can't always have your cake, eat it, throw it up, and eat it again—can you? Just remember: Universal's bandicoot is alive and well—he's just changed his address.

DAVE HALVERSON

"The effects—real-time lighting, reflections, water, moving flora and rain—are superb. The game truly is a marvel"







The bottom line is, if you like the Crash formula—as it seems a few (million) do—then you will undoubtedly embrace this gorgeous sequel, loaded with attitude and button-crunching goodness.

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER: UBI SOFT
PUBLISHER: UBI SOFT
AVAILABLE: NOW

INTO THE DARK NIGHT

Ubi Soft's *Batman Vengeance* puts on new spin on an age-old superhero franchise

'...a Gotham-sized adventure chasing after the elusive and exceedingly sinister Joker—aided by hotties Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy...'

Batman has had a precarious videogame past. Sunsoft delivered three bat-tastic incarnations with the brutally hard 8-bit NES version, an impressive, top-down PC engine game, and then the infamous "small box" Batman romp for Mega-Drive that took years to make its way stateside to our Sega Genesis.

Since, things have been a bit rocky. A so-so second Genesis game made a better showing on Sega CD (with added 3D elements); there were two awesome SNES games from Konami; another gorgeous—but impossible—Genesis game (*Adventures of Batman and Robin*); and a horrendous Saturn game capable of making Mensa students cry from confusion.

Next came a side-scrolling arcade beat 'em up for the Saturn and PlayStation that featured trillion-hit combos amidst traditional bare-knuckle gameplay. Finally—the nail that I thought would hammer the Batcave shut—the abysmal *Batman: The Animated Series* titles for the PS and N64. Like I said—rocky.

But just when I thought the bat was down for the count, Ubi Soft unleashes a gizmo-packed bat-fest that'll have fans clamoring for the old spandex.

Batman Vengeance takes us on a Gotham-sized adventure chasing after the elusive and exceedingly sinister Joker—aided by hotties Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy, as well as Mr. Freeze and more thugs than you can shake a Batarang at. The Caped Crusader (assisted by God's gift to game capes) must grapple, swing, jump, sneak and snipe his way through 19 cavernous settings, encompassing all manners of 3D action, puzzle-solving and racing through Gotham in the Batmobile—and one kick ass helicopter chase.

Things go a bit awry when Batman's wide stance gets in the way during some of the more intricate platform bits—but overall, aside from a few minor frame-rate hiccups, the gameplay is solid and the levels themselves, imaginatively fabricated.

Bathed in streamlined visuals and muted color schemes, riddled with play mechanics derived from a mass of gadgets—and a fitting score to seal the deal—*Batman Vengeance* is hopefully the beginning of a new era for the Dark Knight.

DAVE HALVERSON

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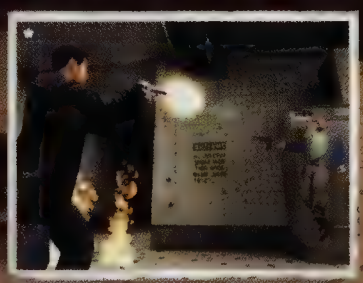

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IGN.COM 9.3/10 GAMESPOT.COM 9.2/10

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"HIGH INTENSITY, TWO-FISTED GUNPLAY WITH HONG KONG-STYLE CINEMATOGRAPHY. COMPLETE WITH PLAYABLE SLO-MO AND BULLET-TIME. THIS GAME JUST ROCKS." - NEXT GEN

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CAREER OF 'EVIL'

In one of the year's most creative works, In Utero casts a fantasy that is as taxing on the brain as it is to your dexterity

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER: IN UTERO
PUBLISHER: UBI SOFT
AVAILABLE: NOW

'The amalgamation of the insane story, demented characters and handmade feel make *Evil Twin* intriguing'

In Utero isn't exactly a household name—it sounds more like a medical condition—and games portraying psychotic orphans are an even lesser known commodity. But all of that is about to change.

Think you know a thing or two about troubled youth, about childhood psychosis? Well, think again. The peculiar chaps at IU take us on an excursion that's as evil as it is surreal, as morbid as it is fantastical—but all in the nicest way possible. When your brain isn't busy processing the sheer insanity and bizarre nature of it, it's trying to overcome some of the most challenging platforming since the NES era. And that, my friends, is a very, very good thing.

Making your way through a story that involves the protagonist, Cyprien's lost teddy bear, Lenny, each of his fellow orphan's private psychosis, and a dreamland in the grips of an evil tyrant (all to impish, Danny Elfman-like musical accompaniment), the overall proceedings look and feel set it apart from literally everything else on the market.

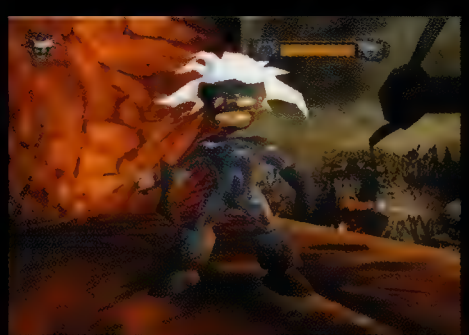
Exploring Loren Darith, a demented dreamscape, in search of four pieces of a key called the "Zipette" lead by Wilbur, an elephantine mutant, Cyprien visits people and places rarely imagined—think *Alice in Wonderland* as told by Marilyn Manson through the eyes of Tim Burton. Many of the environments resemble a kind of diabolical clutter; the dreary stains most people empty out of their brains is where these guys obviously live. The gamescape is at once the most detailed I have ever seen, while at the same time, is so utterly strange that I felt compelled to just run around and take it all in. Odd bumps and railings, patches of this and that, holes you can fall into by chance, odd tents and freakish towers—some of the hubs are just pure madness.

The levels themselves, though, are wonderfully assembled, providing captivating backdrops for the rigorous gameplay, all lit to perfection in concert with the game's many color schemes. Running the gamut, the gameplay encompasses adventure, exploration, role playing, shooting, vertical accents, platforming—it's all in here.

The amalgamation of the insane story, demented characters and handmade feel make *Evil Twin* intriguing—while admittedly a game for experts—but don't expect to read too many favorable reviews elsewhere. The game is also eminently confusing in a matter befitting its lunacy. I can only imagine someone that likes games to be presented in nice, spelled out layers attempting to come to grips with this twisted concoction. The fact that the best bits really come into focus nearly five hours into play may also determine its fate. At the game's outset even I—purveyor of all things dark—was skeptical. It's just so bizarre.

But once I got my bearings I became enthralled. *Evil Twin* may not be for everyone—but either is Kathie Lee Gifford (and she's a lot more surreal than any videogame could ever be).

DAVE HALVERSON



GLORIOUS GALLEON

Ay, it's the second game from Toby Gard, me maty

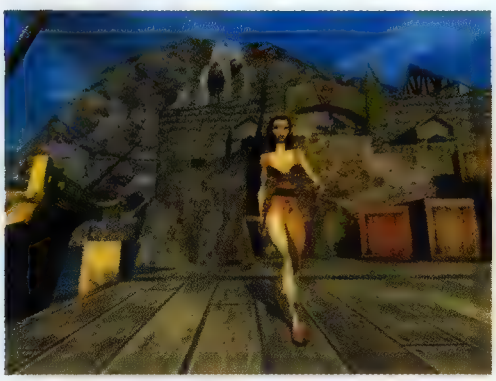
SYSTEM: GAMECUBE
DEVELOPER:CONFOUNDING FACTOR
PUBLISHER: INTERPLAY
AVAILABLE: Q4

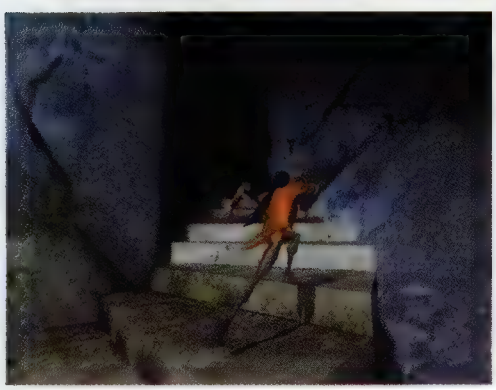
Industry insiders have been chitchatting about *Galleon* for years, the highly anticipated follow-up from Toby Gard, lead designer on the original *Tomb Raider*. Toby broke away from Core and founded Confounding Factor some years ago and has been working on the next big thing in action/adventure gaming ever since. Most expected the game to surface on the ill-fated Dreamcast—before it became so—but when Sega went soft (ware, that is) Nintendo picked up the ball. As a result, *Galleon* is one of the brightest stars in the GameCube universe, standing out as one of the few original games among a sea of ports. What makes *Galleon* so special is apparent in every facet of the game, from fleshed out compelling characters to the mesmerizing story, fluid natural animation and seamlessly integrated puzzles. Obviously, this is Toby's ultimate vision, the kind of a game that's impossible to get made—unless you make it yourself.

One thing he's chosen wisely is the time period and theme. No red-blooded Yank can resist the whole *Sinbad* vibe. Fare maidens with gratuitous cleavage, swashbuckling, magic, sword battles—bring all that. The gameplay incorporates Shaolin style fighting along with Rhama's ability to call on two female character's (lucky bastard) to aid him—Faith, a student of healing, and Mihoko, a great warrior.

The game revolves around Captain Rhama Sabrier of the good ship Endeavor. The six island journey begins with Rhama and his crew, sailing into the port of Akbah at the request of the town's wise and respected healer, Areliano, to investigate a troubling discovery. A strange ship from a faraway land is frozen in time, its warring factions frozen in wood as they died. Where it goes from there we'll find out this Christmas when the game debuts—soon after the GameCube launch. Time will tell if Toby can strike gold twice.

DAVE HALVERSON





'GIANTS' EMERGE

Monty Python funny and videogame epic, *Giants: Citizen Kabuto* redefines the term British Intelligence

The small band of dedicated game creators that make up Planet Moon are quite possibly the best thing to come out of the UK since the English muffin. They chiseled away on their first game, *Giants: Citizen Kabuto*, for the better part of three years, crafting exactly what they wanted: a laugh riot, engulfed in an epic adventure unlike anything you have ever seen or played. The result is the videogame equivalent of *Star Wars*, a science-fiction epic that feels incredibly fresh even though it conjures images from similar fare. In bringing the PC epic to the console, the game's benefactor, Digital Mayhem, has done a magnificent job ditching some of the games slower PC bits (it still has base-building, just less of it) and streamlining for console gaming consumption.

The tale unfolds across numerous and massive mountainous regions that are in full view all the time. Although the usual trade-offs apply—the textures, though nice, aren't exactly *Devil May Cry* caliber; and the character animation is limited to strafing and straight-ahead running with no diagonal schemes in-between—the overall look and feel of the game is uncanny. The models themselves are quite nice and the enemies are detailed well and masterfully designed, from the huge beasts they ride to the smallest Vimp (the game's hairless, Ostrich-like food supply).

Plus, the gameplay is—without question—some of the freshest and most engulfing I have ever encountered. Rarely is there a moment when you're not living the experience. From the hijinks of the Meccas (easily the funniest bit of gaming in existence) to the eerily bold Delphi adventure and massive Kabuto stomp-a-thon, the mix of sniping, shooting, strategy, boss-fighting, and exploration is so far off the hook it's got an unlisted number.

If you've ever dreamt about a game where the characters might quip "me balls are saggy," you've arrived. If Digital Mayhem can tackle a few frame-rate issues, *Giants* will certainly prove to be one of this year's very best.

DAVE HALVERSON

XBOX

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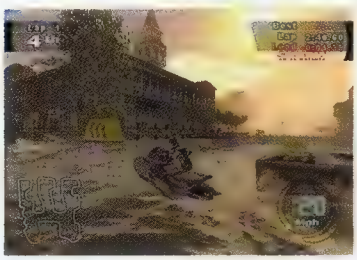
MAKING A SPLASH

Rainbow Studios work their magic again with *Splashdown*. *Wave Race* beware.

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER: RAINBOW STUDIONS
PUBLISHER: INFOGRAMES
AVAILABLE: NOW



Nintendo's seminal *Wave Race* series has finally been faced with a worthy competitor. Rainbow Studios, makers of *ATV Offroad Fury*, have turned their talented eyes to the sparse watersport racing genre—and as with their previous effort, the result is fantastic.

Splashdown, unlike *Wave Race*, features sit-down Sea Doos as its vehicles, immediately giving the game a speedier, more hunkered down vibe that imparts a great sensation of the watercraft skimming the surface of the water. The craft truly feel buoyant as they porpoise and breach after jumps and environmental bumps. Physically, the game is on par with *Wave Race*, only losing out on the fact that *Wave Race*—both old and new—features absolutely churning waves that are sometimes *so* large that they dramatically block the view. *Splashdown* has nothing like this, instead relying on more rolling ripples and incredible water surface detail: It looks uncannily real. And *Splashdown* goes *Wave Race* one better by offering a very high track count—and all the environments have the same sort of rounded, matte finish that gave *ATV* its great sense of place.

I only wish that *Splashdown*'s play was as focused as *Wave Race*. The game's one flaw is that it forces you to perform stunts. Every time you jump in the game, you have to perform goofy-looking maneuvers to build up your performance meter, enabling you to go faster. I obviously don't mind that the stunts are there, I just wish you didn't have to do them to keep up with the computer. The physics modelling and the graphics are both easily good enough to support the concept of this being a pure racing game. There is enough substance in controlling the vehicles and enjoying the sensation of water without having to resort to gimmicks.

Apart from this hiccup, *Splashdown* is a great racing game. Not only is it gorgeous, but it has an inherent satisfaction built into it that makes it a joy to play. Is it better than *Wave Race*? Well, it's not as inspired as the original—which remains an almost magical play—but it's better than *Wave Race: Blue Storm* by a hair. If it had the sleek and fast presentation of that game, it would be better still.

TIMOTHY PIKE

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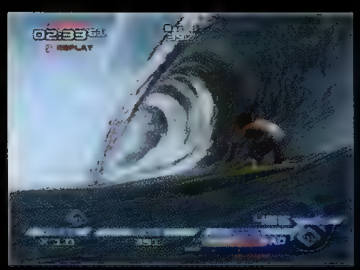
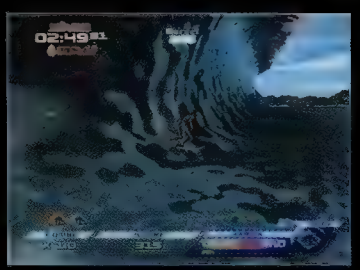
GAME BOY ADVANCE

NewKidCo

XBOX BIG!

words by Dave Halverson





TRANSWORLD SURFING

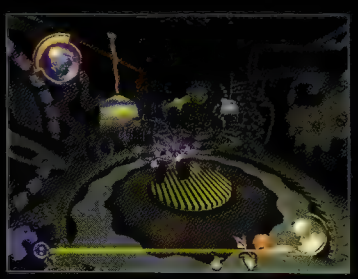
Infogrames / Angel Studios

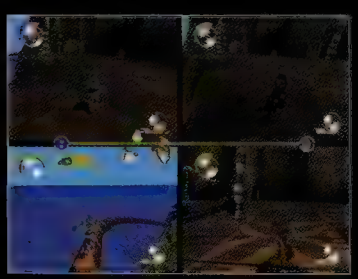
It may not be the premiere Xbox launch title—but dude, it's like, the only surfing game. Easy to learn, hard to master control schemes make it user friendly enough for any wanker, and even though the waves look a tad artificial (imagine animated water textures laid over the perfect wave), *Transworld Surfing* actually plays really well. As the sets roll in, you can place your official surf babe or bro—via Sea-Doo—on the wave of your choice (if you're too spent to paddle) and then take off. Next comes the fun part: Shred! Shoot the tube, off the lip, carve—backside air! Gnarly! With free surf and championship modes, you can stay out all day! Now you can toast a fatty and hit glass-off without getting sand in your pants, springing for gas and beer, or freezing your nads off! Isn't technology grand?

MAD DASH

Eidos / Crystal Dynamics

After the abysmal *Running Wild* on PlayStation did anything but, *Mad Dash* finally brings the critter rally concept home in style—and the secret is in the hardware. The Xbox easily manipulates massive courses at 60fps while four mad creatures run completely amok. Multiple and hidden paths abound, while pitfalls and carefully placed traps keep you on your toes, hooves and what have you. The gameplay—a melee of jumping, sliding and briskly spinning the right analog stick for a variety of functions—is a kick in the ass; and the characters are a lovable yet motley bunch. A cross-section of freaks and mutant critters, they're voiced by the likes of Charles Martinet (Mario), Billy West (*Ren and Stimpy*, *Futurama*) and animate quite generously, especially in the all-important "round" parts. Moby, Fatboy Slim, Propellerheads, MDFMK, Juno Reactor among others supply the soundtrack.





As Microsoft brings America back into the console wars, one thing is perfectly clear. This ain't Atari. X is one bad box.

All of my friends ask me, "Should I buy an Xbox or a GameCube?". The answer to that question is getting exceedingly tough. After sitting down with both consoles now, they are equally dynamite apps, each in their own way. Xbox is big—very big—and the GameCube is small—cute even. Xbox has *Halo* and *Munch*; GameCube has *Luigi* and *Rogue Leader*. In the end, these consoles will be defined by their exclusive software—due to the nature of software ports—price point, and the sector of the market they cater to. It's pretty obvious that Microsoft is dialing in on the *Maxim* crowd while Nintendo continues to play the entire field. The Xbox is 100 bucks more, but it has internal memory and plays DVDs. The GameCube is cheaper, but it looks like a lunch pale...

You can go back and fourth all day. Nintendo has *Starfox Adventures*, *Pikmin* and *Mario* in the pipe; Xbox has *Jet Set Future*, *Valkyrie Profile* and a host of games for men—not boys up their sleeves. Looking at it this way, one thing is eminently clear. To be truly happy you're going to need both of these machines, but if you can only afford one, it's rather obvious that which you choose will be based on who you or the person you're buying it for. I'll tell you this—the Xbox rocks, hamburger pad and all. If *Halo* and *Munch* are the launch titles, then God help us in a year or two.

DAVE MIRRA FREESTYLE BMX 2

Acclaim / Z Axis

While the faces on the bank of BMXers represented in *Mirra 2* still emanate the blank stare of the living dead, in every other facet, the game has benefited greatly from its Xbox pedigree. Whether it's the added development time or the byproduct of having the ability to load and store more data, this version is smoother and tighter than the PS2 game. It takes a little more getting used to—holding the hamburger that is the Xbox controller, with it's oddly placed quiver of Skittles' buttons—but it's worth the effort. The freedom of real BMX is exhibited in vivid detail. Your "things to do" meter always pegged, you can talk to guys, link tricks, attempt crazy manuals and cause a general nuisance until the cows come home. PLAY tip: Don't always think air—to link eight manuals, just find a long, flat spot (down, down, X, down, down, X...).

TEST DRIVE OFF-ROAD: WIDE OPEN

Infogrames / Angel Studios

The world needed another *Test Drive Off-Road* game about as much as it did more traffic on the 405. However, Angel Studios have crafted *Wide Open* so well that even I became a dirt devil, tooling around in my Humvee to the sounds of Metallica, Fear Factory and Digital Assassins screaming "Nehaa!" like a true gear head. (When it comes to wide open spaces, these guys have the patent.)

Save some texture popping, *Wide Open* is as solid as a rock. But the real essence of the game is in the "career mode" where you race to amass cash, ultimately graduating into the "Modified" and "Unlimited" classes where the real trucks reside. While it brings little in the way of innovation, the game does what it sets out to do very well. It's not at the top of my must-have Xbox list, but somewhere there's a guy suckin' down a Budweiser that thinks *Munch* is for sissy boys.

HALO EFFECT

Bungie takes the FPS to stratospheric new heights with their stunning Xbox launch title, *Halo*

Before I had the pleasure of sitting down with an Xbox in the comfort of my own home, I had very nearly dismissed the system as a big, boorish American game console that had a snowball's chance of succeeding against the establishment—the PS2. Well, call me a convert, as I've just played one of—if not the best—single player FPS games of all time.

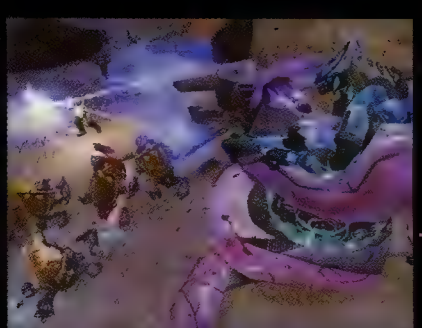
Bungie's *Halo*, which originally began development as a Mac OS game of all things, is so incredibly designed and conceived, it almost feels like a whole new genre of game. Certainly, all the FPS conventions are there, but the execution is in another league, giving the player an incredible sense of actually "being there" fighting off alien hordes. Those latent *Aliens* fantasies can finally be fulfilled.

As you make your way through the gorgeous sci-fi environments of *Halo*, it is impossible not to laugh with glee every ten minutes or so. The first of these moments comes within the first five minutes of the game as aliens invade your space cruiser. There is gunfire everywhere, with your fellow Marines blasting aliens all around you, screaming back and forth to each other. The six channel sound is stunning, with laser blasts, gun reports and death throes echoing throughout the room. I literally jumped when an alien voice came from behind me. I thought I was being abducted. *Halo* has that effect on you.

Indeed, there is almost too much goodness to describe here. Just the way the aliens move and react as you look at them, for example, through your sniper rifle, is astounding. They seem alive, ducking behind pillars when they notice you or screaming with fear and flailing their arms about as you toss a sticky plasma grenade onto them. And the situations you find yourself in during the game are no less impressive. Driving this jeep around (which has ridiculously lousy control) while your gunner fires from the mounted gun is hilariously entertaining, as is manning an alien gun turret and blasting the shit out of everything in sight.

Take my word for it: You've never played a FPS like this before. You become so involved in it, the experience borders on virtual reality. And this is just the single-player game. There is all the expected multiplayer fun to be had, including a cooperative run through the story mode and link up play. *Halo* is not to be missed.

TIMOTHY PIKE



Incredible graphics, incredible action. Isn't this what games are all about?

VERY MUCH 'ALIVE'

Dead or Alive 3 is the best looking fighting game of all time. Let the Xbox reign begin.

SYSTEM: XBOX
DEVELOPER: TEAM NINJA
PUBLISHER: TECMO
AVAILABLE: NOW

I remeber a time when every new system needed a fighting game at launch. The Saturn had *Virtua Fighter*, the PS had *Tekken* and *Toshinden*, the Dreamcast had *Virtua Fighter 3* and the PS2, *Tekken Tag*. Now the market has changed so that a fighting game is no longer a necessity. But after playing Tecmo's *Dead or Alive 3* on Xbox, things may just change.

In short, this is the best looking fighting game I've ever seen on a home console. *Virtua Fighter 4* might be close, but it's got a lot to live up to now. *Dead or Alive 3* is just stunning. The character models are marvels of real-time rendering, with perfect joints, incredible texture work and superb animation. And the game's environments, most of them multi-tiered as in *Dead or Alive 2*, are absolutely stunning. Marvel at the foot tracks left in the snow by the fighters. Be thrilled by hundred foot drops. Shudder with joy at the gorgeous beach scene. Laugh with glee at the perfect water effects. As a technical demonstration of the Xbox's strength, it doesn't get much better than this.

Thankfully, the game plays as good as it looks. *DoA* has always been a fun series, but it's taken on extra depth and satsifaction here. You are given more options in your fighting style, with new features like air throws bringing even more excitement to the game. And the subjective qualities, like the feeling of connecting with a brutal combo, are simply perfect, giving the game a dynamic intensity that is unrivaled.

DoA 3 is marvelous. It satisfies in every way that a good fighting game should. And it's very accessible, rewarding players with precise play and frantic button mashing. This is a fighting game for everyone. Did I mention that it also looks amazing.

TIMOTHY PIKE

BALD AMBITION

Oddworld Inhabitants bring the twisted world of Abe into 3D with *Munch's Oddysee*. Does it work?

Make no mistake: The artists at Oddworld are some of the most talented working in the field of gaming today. One need only look to the previous *Abe* games on PlayStation to see the evidence But now, faced with the task of taking a generally static render and bringing it into the realm of real-time, how much artistry can survive the needs of on-the-fly rendering?

The answer is: quite a lot. To a surprising degree, the Xbox is a powerhouse of a machine, allowing—even in this first generation of games—a great deal of pure artistry to show through. Take the lead character here, Munch, a single-legged fish thing known as a Gabbit. He is intricately detailed, having the sort of visual presence that was normally only afforded to rendered sprites. And he truly feels of the environment that he is moving around in, whether it is a softly rendered outdoor landscape or dark and dingy industrial zone. The same goes for Abe, returning hero from his previous adventures.

However, as much as the artistry, curiosity has propped up about how Oddworld would translate the precise 2D play of the original games into this new, more free 3D world. Without a doubt, some conceits have been made, highlighting the fact that Oddworld's strengths are more visual than anything else. 3D games are very, very difficult to get right, and while Oddworld has certainly done a great job, there is a faint sense of a lack of understanding about truly satisfying play. Running around collecting Spooceorbs to open up doors is a fairly uninspired idea, for example—one which is quite far removed from the more clever elements of the game. Where *Munch's Oddysee* works best is when it feels like the first games, with the player employing the game's twisted logic to work out how to get through the various areas. These elements take thought and dexterity—just like the originals. But the game stumbles a bit when the player is given the opportunity to play as both Munch and Abe at the same time, switching back and forth between the two. This idea literally killed *Donkey Kong 64*, and it's an idea that's almost as annoying here, in my opinion.

Even so, *Munch's Oddysee* is a wonderful game to look at—and most of the time, it's quite fun—as the control, level design and situations are good. It's just missing that final bit of brilliance that could have elevated it into the realm of *ICO*, the new standard in logic adventuring.

TIMOTHY PIKE

GOTHAM CITY

Bizarre Creations brings *Metropolis Street Racer* to Xbox

I was a pretty big fan of *Metropolis Street Racer* on Dreamcast. Certainly the best looking racing game on the system by a long shot, I was also entertained by the game's unique racing system that rewarded—not only speed—but driving style, giving the player points, or Kudos, to use the game's vernacular by drifting the car or performing other cool looking maneuvers.

Project Gotham is basically that same game, given a few tweaks, some new cars and visually re-imagined through the deep processing power of the Xbox. Indeed, there are times when this game looks better than the almighty *Gran Turismo 3*. But is it a better game?

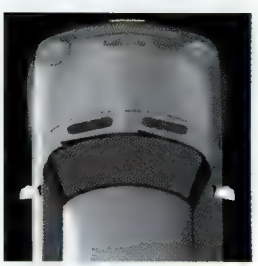
Well, the cheap answer is that it's different. This game is not about having a fetishistic attachment to your cars. Rather, it's more pure—in a sense—in that it's all about the driving, not the tuning of the cars. And in this game, driving the cars is a blast. The physics model is fantastic. It certainly feels real enough, but that's not the goal. The goal is to impart a pleasurable sensation as you drift around the courses—and the game does this marvelously. You feel the weight of the cars, the slip angle of the tires—and the cars behave in such a way that makes perfect sense within the context of a videogame.

As for the structure which surrounds this dynamic pleasure, it's just like *MSR*. There are racing challenges and point challenges, like setting hot laps, overtaking tests and feats of pure drifting acumen—all great fun. And the new cars available in this game are fantastic. The new Mini, as well as Porshe's GT car, are just a couple of the additions, and all cars feature real-time deformation, showing very realistic evidence of shunts with crumpled surfaces and blown headlights.

In case you haven't already surmised as much, *Project Gotham* is another great Xbox launch game.

TIMOTHY PIKE

'There are times when *Project Gotham* looks better than *GT3*'



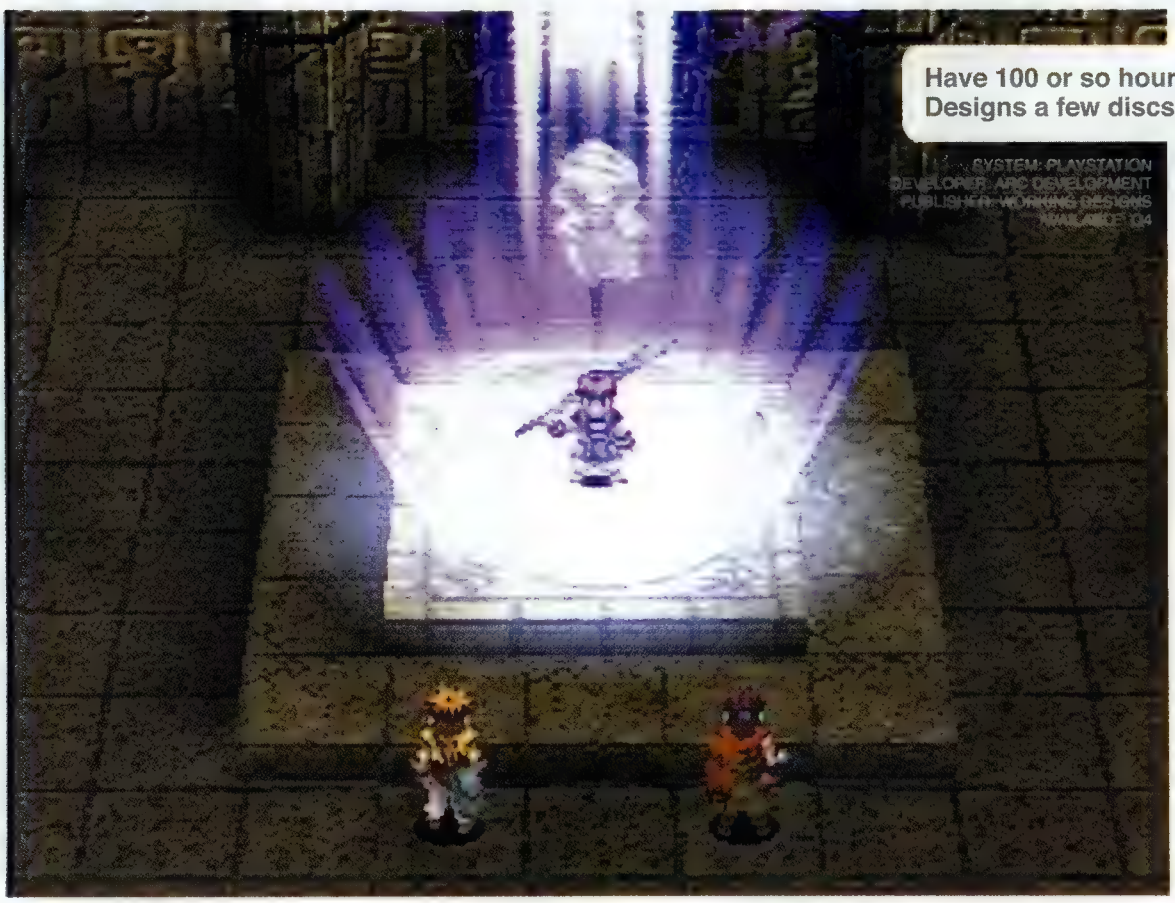
SYSTEM: XBOX
DEVELOPER: BIZARRE CREATIONS
PUBLISHER: MICROSOFT
AVAILABLE: NOW

JET SET FUTURE

If you try this in real life, the police will crack a knot on your head...So do it on Xbox

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then this is *War and Peace.* Debuting Q1 2002 for the XBox, Sega's *Jet Set Radio Future* is the game the world is waiting for. You'll be so busy with the new, more powerful tricks (grind up the side of a building while executing multiple combos!) and user-friendly play mechanics, that you may forget to say, "Holy mother! Look at these crazy visuals!" Motion blurs, particle effects, mass pedestrians and immense cityscapes. Await you. Pretty X-citing, eh?

DAVE HALVERSON



ARC COLLECTION

Have 100 or so hours to spare? Working Designs a few discs for you...

Three chapters, six CDs, four complete games and over 100 hours of compelling gameplay. That's one heck of a role-playing swan song for the stalwart 32-bit hit-maker, Sony PlayStation. Plus, it's from Working Designs, so it'll be packaged like it's bound for Buckingham Palace. Working Designs has turned all three games inside out—polishing them for their US debut—and even managed to include *Arc Arena Monster Tournament.* In the next PLAY, we'll delve deep into the underbelly of *Arc The Lad Collection.*

DAVE HALVERSON

warioland 3

Wario's archrival has finally made his way onto the GBA—and platforming is at hand. The name of the game is play mechanics and true to his series. *Super Wario 4* is soaking in them. Aside from the semi-2D visuals you seem on a portable, the pugnacious one's fourth foray features droves of puzzle-tastic 2D, all the moves you've come to know and love—from ass-bouncing to bloated wario attacks—and a great soundtrack to tie it all together. All of the classic Nintendo traits apply: collectibles, captivating level design, ingenious bosses and, of course, mini games and attitude in spades. Wario's doing a little lamb raiding this time out, but to escape with the booty he'll have to blow down 16 levels and four bosses by unlocking four quadrants of a perplexing pyramid. Each level houses four pieces of gold plus a floating key, which he not only has to find, but escape with it to open the next level. Once you finish a level the countdown begins—Wario actually has to rush back to the beginning of the level before time runs out—and some of these levels are pretty hairy. It's all more than good, people. *SW4* is pure GBA magic.

DAVE HALVERSON

lady sia

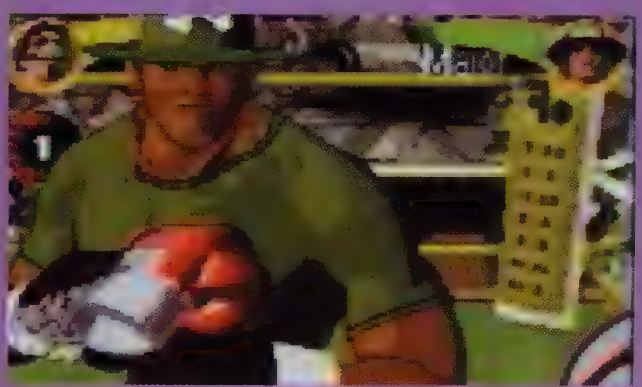
PUBLISHER: TDK
AVAILABLE: NOW

Why am I reviewing *Lady Sia* after it's been out for over a month? Because I've seen it described elsewhere as everything from an RPG to a walk-through platformer—and as an avid GBA player, that ruffles my feathers. In fact, if you're looking for a deep platformer, *Wario Ware*, *Klonoa* and *Sia* should all be at the top of your list. In terms of depth, the lady is hard to beat. A real *Valis/Altered Beast* throwback, *Lady Sia* is laden with puzzles, timing stints, a healthy array of moves and has a solid magic system that adds nicely to the overall balance. It's impressively drawn and animated, incorporates cinematic story elements, is layered precariously with parallax scrolling and is plenty long—an important aspect for any handheld game. Me thinks TDK has a portable franchise in the making. Aside from a couple of needed collision tweaks here and there and a somewhat repetitious soundtrack—*Lady Sia* is a pretty foxy lady.

DAVE HALVERSON

boxing fever

DEVELOPER: DIGITAL FICTION
PUBLISHER: MAJESCO
AVAILABLE:NOW



Even though most MES archivists never thought *Mike Tyson's Punch-Out* would meet with the next generation of gamers, the dream has become a reality. *Boxing Fever* compiles both the energy and perspective of the original—minus any brand association or annoying nicknames—squarely out to be an exciting romp on the GBA. An "Amateur" circuit gives beginners a quick, three-round practice tour; but four progressively difficult championships, ranging from "Pro AM" to "World Title," will make you sweat hard before attaining that weighty, metal belt. Some fairly impressive animated characters exist throughout each round of brutality—Major Flak has military punch, Knuckles Nadine has a saucy tap—making *Fever* a one-of-a-kind throwback to the past.

JON M GIBSON

capsule reviews

KINETICA

words: **dave halverson**

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER: SCEA
PUBLISHER: SCEA
AVAILABLE: NOW

A better concept than it is a game, *Kinetica* is beautiful to look at (especially if you like them butt cheeks—and who doesn't) but not so thrilling to play. The courses themselves—at times, overly confusing—are gorgeous, but the speed and control scheme leaves much to be desired. Even using the proper cornering techniques to turn isn't an exact science; and the constant need to perform tricks—both ground and air—in order to amass the requisite turbo (needed to win every race within the last 1/2 lap) takes you out of any racing groove. Radiant art, groovy tunes and an excellent concept can't save the day, but they certainly set the stage for a more refined sequel.

TIME CRISIS 2

words: **jon m gibson**

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER: NAMCO
PUBLISHER: NAMCO
AVAILABLE: NOW

Ahh, the smell of a fresh Namco quill's style in the morning—a philosophy well respected by agents Keith Martin and Robert Baker. For trigger-tapping maniacs—an endurance trial put to great competitive here—*Time Crisis 2* features a one-player double gun option, a unique and ultimately intoxicating mode of play. Not to mention the respected "Arcade" mode, presented on the PS2 in full steam, is a fast and ferocious blend of crosshair action and strategic timing, complete with hidden objectives. Though the cursor offers surprisingly accurate aiming—a trait uncommon in console shooters—the GunCon 2 is recommended for maximum impact.

MEGA MAN X6

words: **jon m gibson**

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION
DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
AVAILABLE: NOW

In this latest continuation of the *Mega Man* saga—probably the most recognizable side-scroller franchise worldwide—Capcom's iconic, blue-built robo probes to discover why a giant reploid has gone berserk. The plot unravels three weeks after the destruction set forth in *X5*, providing a playground of mechanical debris as eye-fluff while employing some new game systems that most followers should embrace with ease. Enemies now appear randomly on each map, challenging players to a higher degree, and additional power-ups can be earned by rescuing reploids. Unfortunately, since the PlayStation is chugging its last breaths, this may be the final *Mega Man* on this hardware—but I'm sure we'll see him again soon with next-gen specs.

DEVIL MAY CRY

words: **timothy pike**

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
AVAILABLE: NOW

Currently, *Devil May Cry* is duking it out with *ICO* for game of the year honors. I haven't played *MGS* in its finished form yet—and that may just wipe everything out—but for the time being, *Devil* is right up there. In short, this is one of the most viscerally satisfying action games I've ever played. The feeling of mowing down enemies is superb, executed with the sort of finesse that reminds you that game making is one of the true art forms of Japan. The control is perfect—a bit like *Zone of Enders* in its smoothness—and of course, the game's graphics are currently second to none. Only a slightly uncooperative camera mars this masterpiece.

ACE COMBAT 4

words: **timothy pike**

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER: NAMCO
PUBLISHER: NAMCO
AVAILABLE: NOW

Namco has pretty much had the action flight sim genre to itself since the first *Air Combat* on PS. What has there been in terms of competition? Konami's *Air Force Delta*? That was a decent game, but nothing can compare with Namco's flair for presentation and inherent sense of fun. So it is with *Ace Combat 4* that Namco reaffirms their ownership of this genre. Featuring a wonderfully illustrated story, the game runs the usual gamut of mission types, but does so with an incredible amount of style. Beautiful atmospheric effects, wonderful plane models and a perfect balance between realism and fun make this a terrific play. The next step is more detailed ground textures. I'm sure they'll crack this next time.

TENNIS 2K2

words: **timothy pike**

SYSTEM: DREAMCAST
DEVELOPER: SEGA
PUBLISHER: SEGA
AVAILABLE: NOW

To be honest, I kind of missed out on the first *Virtua Tennis*. I understood that it was fantastic, but I was so enamored of *Mario Tennis* at the time, I just missed out. Not so this time around. *Tennis 2K2* has my sole attention – and I am amazed. Obviously, the big draw with this sequel is the addition of female players like the Williams sisters (but sadly, no Hingis), but what grabs me the most is the incredible animation and sense of actually watching real people playing tennis. The effect is astonishing. Squint, and it looks like an actual tennis match is happening. Of course, this would mean nothing if it were not fun, but the control is fantastic, making this probably the best tennis game ever made.

FORMULA ONE 2001

words: **timothy pike**

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER: STUDIO LIVERPOOL
PUBLISHER: SONY (66)
AVAILABLE: NOW

As an avid F1 fan, I ask a lot from synthetic representations of the sport. As such, I can't fully endorse Sony's take on *F1*. Pardon me while I get anal here, but the tires on these cars look ridiculous. They're way too wide. I just can't get into the in-car view because it does not look like I'm piloting an F1 machine. I don't know what it looks like, but I know it's not correct. Now, with that out of my system, I have to complain about the control, which is understeer city, regardless of the setup of the car. But I do like the presentation of this game, right down to the cheesy F1A guitar riff which introduces each round of the championship. EA's game is more fun to play – but neither is perfect.

TARZAN UNTAMED

words: **dave halverson**

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER:DISNEY INT.
PUBLISHER: UBI SOFT
AVAILABLE: NOW

The wonder of Disney usually translates well onto home console. Ubi Soft's *Tarzan Untamed* is no exception, ushering Disney into the 128-bit era with impressive style. The game is comprised of four play types: river rapid surfing, vining, some interesting boss challenges and 3D action – all set amidst lush jungle environments that twist impressively in concert with the framework of the animated feature. Fortunately, all four play schemes are represented very well. Although justifiably straightforward – and a little short – *Tarzan* derives staying power from having both story and challenge modes, as well as forcing players to complete way-cool bungee jump challenges to amass enough film reels to move into the game's depth. Impressive cinematics tie it all together.

MX RIDER

words: **dave halverson**

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER: PARADIGM
PUBLISHER: INFOGRAMES
AVAILABLE: NOW

Paradigm's entry into the ever-burgeoning category, *MX Rider*, is ready to kick up some dust on the willing PS2. So if you like your racing more straightforward opposed to the competition's sim-based controls, *MXR* is definitely worth getting all muddy over. While it doesn't possess the sophistication of *AC MX 2002* in terms of technology, *MXR* has all the makings of a must-own racing game. Not that the gameplay is shallow, the dynamics are just a bit more user friendly, centering around picking the right line, skillful braking and cornering, and timing for close proximity jumps. Another key selling point is the game's international flair. Real-time mud and weather, a solid alternative soundtrack and no pop-up whatsoever round out the intriguing gameplay.

OKAGE

words: **dave halverson**

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2
DEVELOPER:ZENER WORKS
PUBLISHER: SCEA
AVAILABLE: NOW

A mysterious bottle, a pet Lilith curse and a shadow with attitude? Bring them all together with a cast as nutty as an *Austin Powers* cocktail and you've got *Okage*, a turn based role-playing game that shatters the mold. If Tim Burton grew up in Japan and became a game designer, this is the game he would make. Great story, quaint – almost magical – locales and a cast of characters (that look like the new Link) that you'll actually care about. From the battle system to the gameplay and storyline, *Okage* is a must for RPG fans, especially if you like your role-playing with a distinctly anime look and feel.

HEAVY METAL

words: **dave halverson**

SYSTEM: DREAMCAST
DEVELOPER: CAPCOM
PUBLISHER: CAPCOM
AVAILABLE: NOW

Is it unfortunate that Capcom's blistering new arena fighter, *Heavy Metal* with character designs by Simon Bisley, appeared on the scene months after the Dreamcast faded from view? Or should it be considered yet another jewel in the DC crown – a system that burned quickly but gave off a very, very bright light... *Heavy Metal* features a vastly improved version of the *Spawn* engine and smooth gameplay among an impressive array of arenas. Choose "Arcade" (fight to the death), "Versus," (or, figure it out) or "Chaos Mode" (grab an item and run like hell) and rock out to some wicked fun-age (Megadeth, Helloid – you get the drift) and a story by Kevin Eastman.

art by Yohiyuki S... from the ... book, Die Metal

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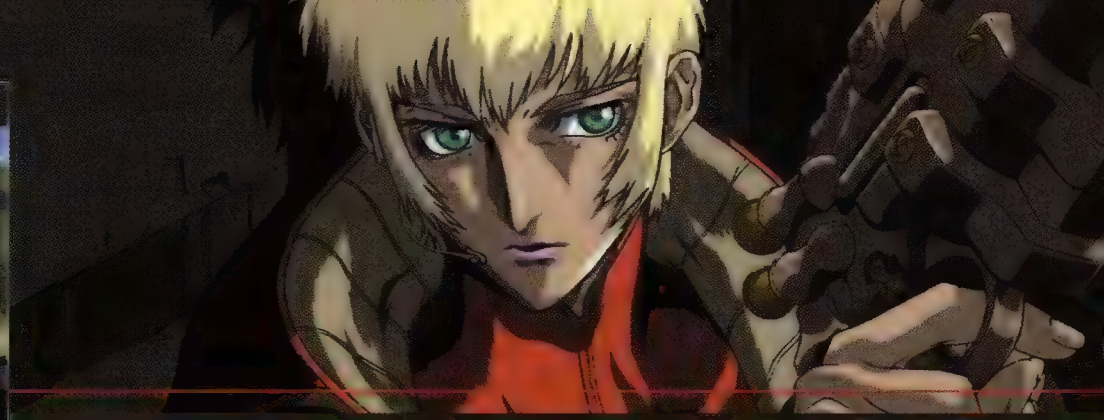
THE HORROR OF LOVE

Whether or not you like science fiction, you go see *The Matrix*. Whether or not you can stomach drama, you go see *Titanic*. And whether or not you can stay awake through anything starring Julia Roberts—well, maybe I'm taking this too far.

VAMPIRE HUNTER D: BLOODLUST

URBAN VISION · MAD HOUSE · R · 103 min

▶ ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶



Anime fan or foe, you absolutely must see *Vampire Hunter D: Bloodlust*. During our sit-down with Mad House—*D*'s benefactors—we spoke of the lines blurring between big budget American animated films and Japanese anime, among other things. Indeed, if *D* wasn't classified as anime—and appeared in theatres under, say, a Dreamworks label—the audience would never know they were watching an import. It's not very often that anime reaches this pinnacle—when the artistry, animation, story, script, voice acting and music marry to form a perfect union—as *D* does, so it should be celebrated by anyone that appreciates the art form. It's further proof that animation can stir the soul of an adult the way Disney lights up the eyes of a child. Evil has never been so delicious.

The film gets underway amidst a bellowing, gothic overture as Meyer Link's seemingly weightless horse-drawn carriage gallops down a narrow thoroughfare, mangling Holy ornaments and flowers in its wake. It stops briefly, allowing the vampire to claim his prey—the beautiful Charlotte—before whisking into the night. Charlotte's father wastes no time in the pursuit of his daughter's captor, hiring the very best hunters to track Meyer, The Marcus Brothers—and D, a legendary Dunpeal slayer who's hand actually does do the talking.

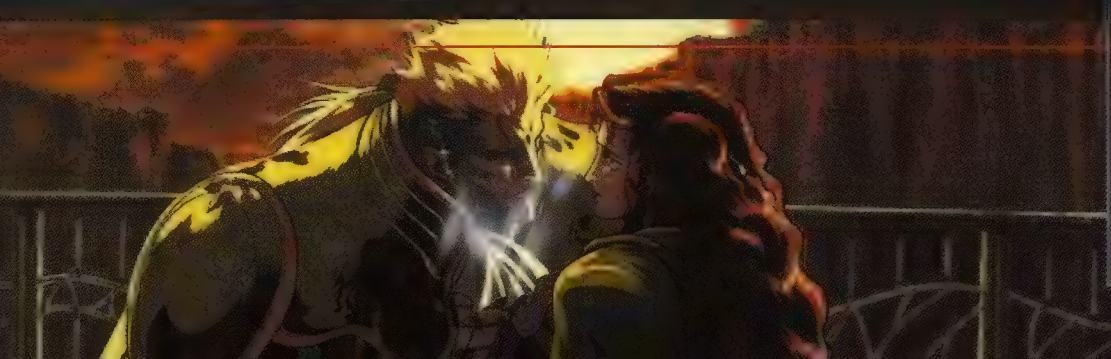
The Marcus brothers—Borgoff and Kyle—travel with three faithful companions: Nolt, a massive bio-human who swings a warhammer the size of a Volkswagen; Grove, an emaciated man who hangs on the brink of death until he is injected with a serum, transforming

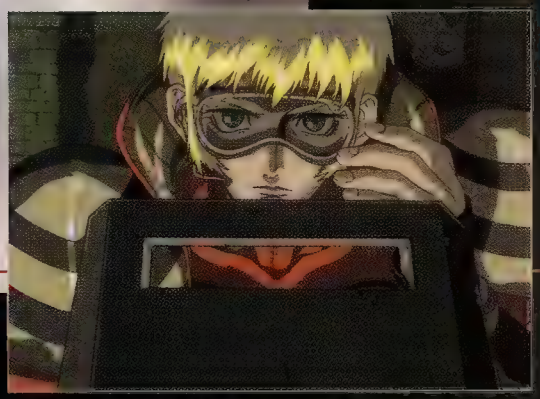
'We set up *D* in the year 12,000 where there is no Japan, no America, no Europe—no nothing—where we could start from scratch'

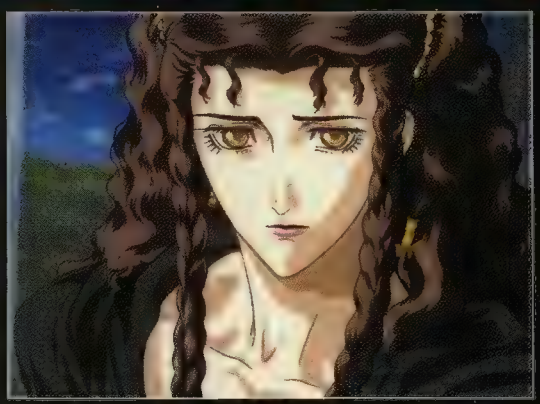
him into a ruinous Holy Spirit; and the lovely—but troubled—Leila, a curvaceous blonde with a massive pistol, a nuclear-powered uni-bike and a seething hatred for vampires. (I love her.) They've got their slaying cut out for them, though. Meyer is closely guarded by three equally ruthless protectors: Bengi, a menacing blackhole of evil who relishes killing—perhaps too much (too bad he splits so soon); Caroline, a boundless shape-shifting hellcat (those are the best kind) capable of fusing with any substance; and Mashita, a werewolf with more teeth in his abs than his head. All three are impeccably designed—and, without exception, are as menacing as they appear.

"When people think of Vampires they think gothic—middle age," explains *D*'s producer, Mataichiro Yamamoto. "We set up *D* in the year 12,000 where there is no Japan, no America, no Europe—no nothing—where we could start from scratch." Such is the film's seductive stage, a decimated planet Earth. We see traces of the planet as it is in our millennium—freeway overpasses, gothic ruins, the rubble of decayed buildings—but it is mostly dark and eerie, even during the day, when desert calm can quickly become a sea of certain death—unless you're a Dunpeal.

Yet, the most captivating aspect of *Bloodlust* is its uncanny emotion. Within the sanctuary of endless evil, the viewer comes to care about all three factions: D, the slayers *and* Meyer Link. In fact, Meyer, the most ruthless







and powerful vampire in the world, is perhaps the most gallant character in the cast. "When the last vampire is extinct, who will mourn our passing? Can anyone understand this pain, this loneliness," exudes the film's opening narration. One can almost feel his pain—his longing for human love. He's willing to burn for it, fighting his insatiable addiction for human blood to preserve his beloved Charlotte.

Not your typical vampire or your typical vampire epic, *D* was actually recorded in English with Japanese subtitles—and it shows. The voice acting is integrated seamlessly, allowing the characters to truly exist on-screen, from the somber yet straightforward Leila to the prideful sophistication of Meyer, and the ingenious comic relief of Left Hand (played masterfully by Mike McShane).

'D' SCULPTED

Koto Inc.'s beautiful D and Meyer Link statues will be surfacing early next year. Tune in next month and find out how you can win one right here!

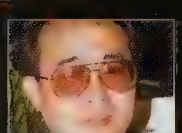
Bloodlust would be a banner film were it minimally animated—given the nearly flawless script—yet viewers are treated to painstakingly fluid animation, too. Even D's hair flows more intricately than an entire season of anime; and the background detail is nearly photo realistic. Plus, it doesn't hurt that Studio Ghibli—house of Miyazaki, the lord of anime—helped bring the film's detailed backgrounds to light…or should that be dark?

There is nothing as magical and beautiful as hand-drawn animation when producers are able to take the necessary steps to fully realize an artisan's vision—especially when it's wrapped in one of the most haunting gothic soundtracks since *Symphony of the Night*, and has an ending that somehow manages to be both poetic and uplifting.

I will celebrate the day Hollywood discovers how to craft effective horror again—a film that tugs at your nerves and stirs your emotions, offering more than just impaled bodies and gory messes. Until that time, I will look to Japan and animation to satisfy my bloodlust.

DAVE HALVERSON

BLOODLUST - PRDUCTION STAFF



Yoshiaki Kawajiri
screenplay

Mataichiro Yamamoto
Producer

Yutaka Minowa
Character Designer

Hiroshi Hamasaki
Animation Director

Hisashi Abe
Animation Director

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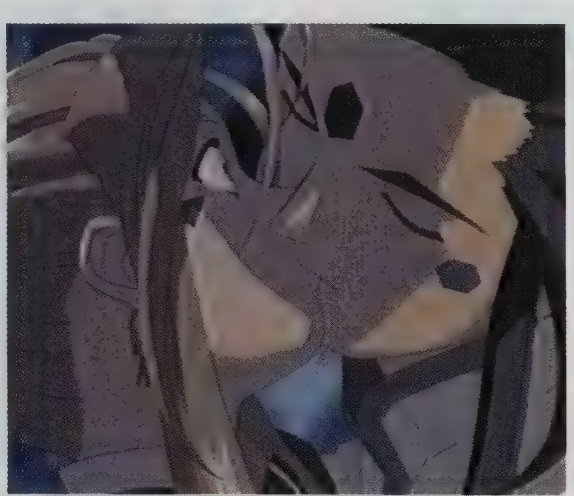
AH! MY GODDESS: THE MOVIE

Pioneer Entertainment · AIC · 13 & up · 106 min

To briefly set up the *Ah! My Goddess* framework, imagine Heaven as one big mainframe, and the Goddess System as its ISP, providing the link between heaven and Earth. Belldandy is a first-class Goddess, a powerful angel—baring a striking resemblance to Jennifer Aniston—sent to Earth after completing her training to grant a wish to troubled college student, Keiichi. Long story short, she ends up staying, along with Urd and Skuld, the two angels sent to retrieve her. What Belldandy doesn't know is that her mentor, Celestin, has become a fallen angel. Angered by the judgmental nature of the "divine ones," he sets out to overthrow their way of balancing universal love and, when caught, is exiled, sentenced to



eternal incarceration in the Luna Dungeon. (In other words, he is banished to the moon.)

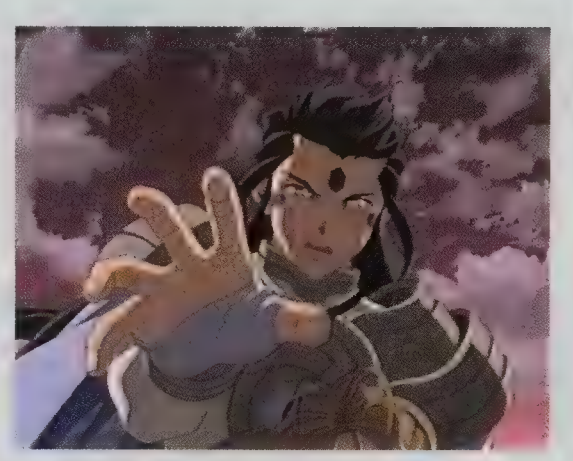
Part of Belldandy's cover on Earth is the "Motor Club," a frat-like association located on the campus where her and Keiichi attend school. The pair has not only fallen in love, but have become side-hack racing champions. All is well on planet Earth: There's a big race coming up and the Motor Club is beginning to really catch on.

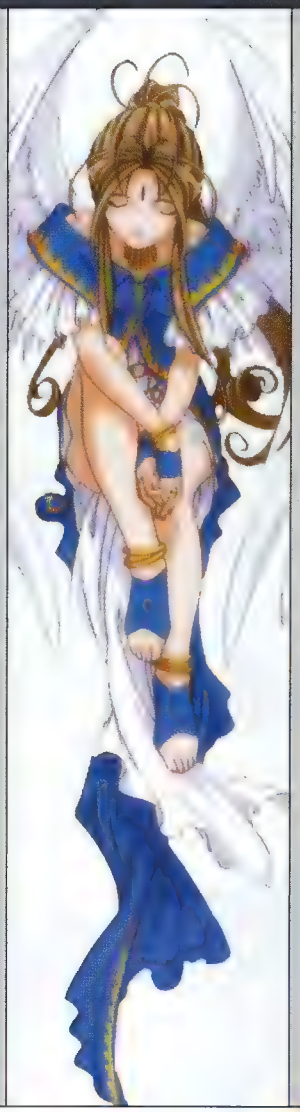
Ah! My Goddess: The Movie begins when Celestin finds a host body to inhabit (the fairy princess Morgan Le Fe who's spirit is weakened when the divine ones separate her from her true love) and returns to Earth. In the thralls of Celestin's powerful spell, she helps orchestrate the catastrophic events that will ultimately threaten the very balance of the heavens. With one kiss, Celestin implants a virus into Belldandy that begins corrupting the very foundation of The Goddess System—but worse yet, it gives Belldandy one serious case of amnesia, setting in motion a cataclysmic chain of events. (God, I love anime!)

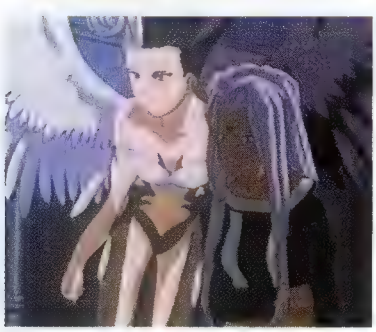
The film is lovingly animated with an emphasis on the marriage between modern computing and the ethereal plane. The Goddesses—especially when their phantasmal angels emanate outside of their bodies—produce a magical element seldom conveyed in divine theorem; and the attention to detail (especially regarding all things cycle oriented) is uncanny—exactly spot on. Down to the clatter of the 100cc two-strokes as they propel exhaust through their expansion chambers, you can almost smell the oil burning.

The fact that motorcycle racing and divine intervention can exist within the same framework of *Ah! My Goddess* is a testament to anime and the people who love it.

DAVE HALVERSON







MOBILE SUIT GUNDAM: THE 08TH MS TEAM

Bandai Entertainment • Sunrise • 13 & up • 75 min

'The tale of two warriors on opposite sides of the fence and their potentially tragic love affair has quickly segued into an action-drama where you care about players from both sides...'

Of all the *Gundam* anime I have ever seen—and it's a lot—no, a ton—*MS 08th Team* is, by far, the best. Series anime just doesn't get much better.

Beginning with the superb writing and voice acting that envelops the story—which is ripe with character development—this series, at least so far, is in a class by itself. As much a character study as it is wartime epic—the sub-stories girdling the best warmongering ensemble since *Mash*—are both ardent and engaging.

What began as the tale of two warriors on opposite sides of the fence and their potentially tragic love affair, has quickly segued into an action-drama where you care about players from both sides—equally. *MS 08th* also provides a rare look under the hood of Gundam technology and a taste of what they might require to pilot and maintain. Not to say the series is overly technical or drab—the details are just subtle, yet profound.

This second DVD revolves around the Zion's massive beetle of a mech, the Apsalus, a weapon that could turn the tide of the war. When it's ambushed behind enemy lines and falls into the 08th Team's territory, both sides are forced to take action. The events that follow will once again bring Shiro and Ina together—but, this time, under even more perilous circumstances.

The 6th episode, "Battle Line on the Burning Sand," is particularly engaging. In fact, it plays out more like a Hollywood screenplay than a dubbed anime. Unfolding in a baron, sun-drenched desert, the producers completely burned the color filters of the episode, giving it the heat-intensified look of *Three Kings* with surprisingly effective results. There's also a nice scene where Karen gives Sanders a good kick in the soldier Mcnuggets that's definitely worth a second look. Now that's what I call military intelligence.

DAVE HALVERSON

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SPRIGGAN

ADV Films • TOHO •
13 & up • 90 min •

> 'The only way mankind will survive its lust for power and abuse of technology is to serve up some divine intervention'

It is inconceivable that one man could build a ship capable of housing two of every beast on the planet. But to collect them, load them, feed them and clean up after them (the horror) for 40 days and 40 nights while God drowned the whole of the human race under him—that seems unlikely.

The authors of *Spriggan* offer another scenario surrounding Noah's Ark, and aside from being one of the most beautifully animated films in the history of the pen, it's as captivating an action script you will perhaps ever come in contact with.

Here are the ground rules: Arcum is the agency assigned to keeping ancient knowledge just that, protecting unearthed relics and artifacts the world over. The immense power that these miraculous wonders hold could set in motion a cataclysmic chain of events, the likes of which could threaten life as we know it. In light of this, the agents devoted to protecting these sights—Spriggans—are, for all intents and purposes, bordering on superhuman. Their reactions, strength, wit and intellects are all peaked; they eat adrenaline junkies for breakfast.

Two such individuals are about to come face-to-face with the realization that Noah's Ark was much, much more than a floating farm. The only way mankind will survive its lust for power and abuse of technology is to serve up some divine intervention via pure, brute force.

Put the children to bed—let TiVo take care of your "Must See TV"—and do yourself a favor: adhere your eyes to animated bliss. Hands down, whether you buy into the plot or not (and you should—it's a doozy), *Spriggan* houses some of—if not *the*—finest animated action sequences on record. The characters' ruthless incarnations, like a covert faction of the CIA, make Arnold look like a girly man. If they don't slice you to ribbons, they'll either crush you like a bug or turn you into psychic squash. You haven't lived until you've looked into the eyes of a cyber child with a God complex.

They took their time about it, but ADV has laid down a masterful dub and brought *Spriggan* home (and into selected theatres) in usual polished form. This has been a great year for anime—and *Spriggan* puts the exclamation on it...with a hammer and nail.

DAVE HALVERSON

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STREET FIGHTER ALPHA

GHOST IN THE SHELL

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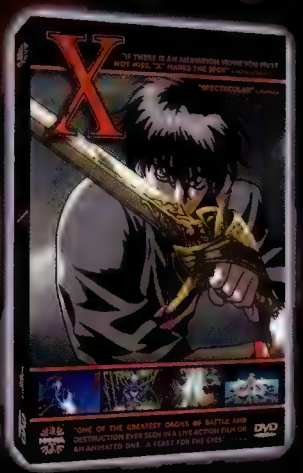

X

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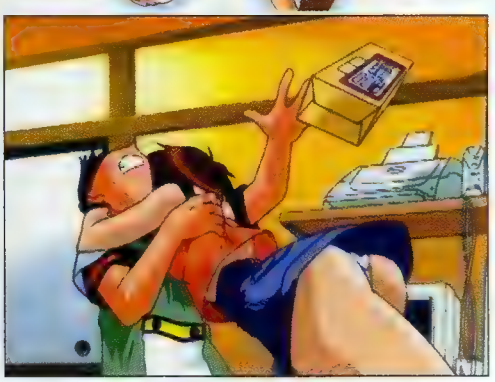
MANGA VIDEO

HAND MAID MAY

Pioneer · Pioneer LDC
13 & up · 75 min

'...a bright, sharply drawn and expertly produced series that's wacky, a bit perverted, and maybe just a little too sweet'



Until now, when über geek Kazuya Saotome wasn't sneaking a peek at the landlady's daughter's private parts, he was working on his latest "doraemon" project—a virtual pet squid that is, to this point, as dumb as a rock. But these days he's knee deep in cyber-dolls. In fact, he's suddenly a lightning rod for them.

It all starts when Kazuya's best friend, enemy and schoolmate Kotaro Nanbara—the poster child for hyper-tension—slips him a nasty virus meant to melt down his hard drive. You see, even though Nanbara is filthy rich, and Kazuya, dirt poor, he always seems to best him when it comes to creating AI programs—so Nanbara is out to fry some squid for a little friendly retribution. His plan backfires when his virus makes a pit stop at www.hand-maid.net and orders up a $1,450,000 cyber-doll.

Luckily for Kazuya, the Cyberdine rep who shows up to deliver the goods—cyberdoll Sara—forgets to collect the C.O.D. when she gets a sudden urge to down 60 bowls of ramen (this babe's ramen habit makes Robert Downey Jr. look like a Narc—she's completely addicted). As a result, Kazuya finds himself with a very small, very sexy and very expensive new friend: May. Once Kazuya completes her user information and locates her USB port (don't ask), Sara's job goes from sales executive to part-time repo-woman—and the insanity begins.

Sexual tension. Meet bio-technology!

Hand Maid May is a bright, sharply drawn and expertly produced series that's wacky, a bit perverted and maybe just a little too sweet. Although, things heat up substantially once May gets a sizeable upgrade.

I can't wait for more!

DAVE HALVERSON

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PILOT CANDIDATE

Bandai Entertainment • Emotion
13 & up • 75 min

> '...a candidate must be a healthy male, age 14-16 years, have the rare blood type EO and possess a special psychic ability...'

Shinji Ikari. Meet Zero Enna...

Warm on the heels of *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, as we wait (and wait, and wait) for the follow-up movies to hit U.S. shores, Bandai has something to tide us over. Not that *Pilot Candidate* is an *Eva* clone, it's just similar in certain key areas; whereas gigantic aliens threaten the planet and only a select group of super-teens can pilot the humanoid fighting vessels capable of stopping them.

The saga revolves around the 14 to 16-year-old male candidates of the GOA pilot training facility, a special school for a very select breed of recruits. GOA's function is to protect the last human planet, Zion, from the omnipotent alien force "Victim"—a massive, mutated race bent on ruling the galaxy (as omnipotent alien races almost *always* are). Five very ethereal-looking, rendered and cel-shaded metal Goddesses called "Ingrids" protect the Zion air space, matched with five pilots and five "repairers." To enter the ranks of GOA, a candidate must be a healthy male, age 14-16 years, have the rare blood type EO and possess a special psychic ability known as EX—think Jedi Knights of the animated breed.

Training lasts three years and should a candidate pass—or, in this case, survive—an existing pilot needs to die or retire for them to earn a shot at one of the five Ingrids. However, if a new recruit proves better than an existing pilot, he may be chosen as a replacement—and Zero Enna is clearly on the fast track. He gets lost between debriefing and his dorm room on day one and finds himself in the Goddesses' staging chamber. It is here that we learn of Zero's earlier connection with one Ingrid in particular—Eva Rena—as she absorbs and soon begins to mysteriously reach full "tuning" capacity with him. Like Evas, Ingrids envelop their host in a gel-like substance, allowing the pilot to see and do as the unit does.

But Zero's nowhere near pilot status. So the plot thickens.

Although the producers make no attempt to mask the dichotomy between traditional cel animation and CGI styles, *Pilot Candidate* looks fantastic, with character designs reminding of *Outlaw Star* and 3D-bathed in the ever popular cel-shading technique of *Jet Grind Radio* and *Fur Fighters*.

The opening theme, a throwback to classic sci-fi, serves as a fitting gateway to a saga that seems primed to carry on the tradition of top quality anime series from Bandai.

DAVE HALVERSON

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GATEKEEPERS

Pioneer Entertainment • Gonzo
13 & up • 80 min

> '...blends just the right amount of CG with digital animation, ingenious character designs and a seamless English dub'

The time is 1969—post World War II Tokyo—and Shun Ukiya is still trying to deal with his father's untimely death. He was always too busy working on his futuristic car to schedule time for his son and it's made Shun a bitter, somewhat reckless teenager. But he's about to discover that he possesses "gate ability," the power to open gates to summon massive energy from other dimensions. All that A.E.G.I.S. (the agency delegated to discover individuals with the rare ability) has to do is convince Shun to sign up and become the second gatekeeper, joining the snot-bubble-blowing Rurippe, a girl of supple thighs but unusually heavy nasal drainage. And why exactly does A.E.G.I.S. need the help of such gifted individuals? To battle space aliens—what else!?

Watching anime religiously over most of the last decade, I've seen aliens throw just about everything imaginable at planet Earth. In most cases, would-be master races rain down in the form of gigantic mechs or via mammoth space armadas. But the creators of *Gatekeepers* see things in a completely different and refreshingly unique light. Their threat to humanity—Invaders—look like rejects from a *Men in Black* cattle call and the mighty, teen gatekeeper force that fights against them are just as unconventional—at least in anime terms. They don't even pilot giant robots (although, they do have one helluva cool bus).

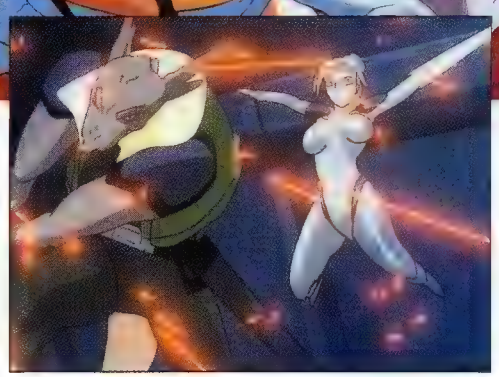
A quality production through and through, *Gatekeepers* blends just the right amount of CG with quality digital animation, ingenious character designs (it's all about "fusion," people), and, as usual, a seamless English dub.

DAVE HALVERSON

ANGEL LINKS

Bandai Entertainment • Sunrise
13 & up • 75 min

'The opening and closing credits are eloquently silent for the final episode, flooding the screen with emotion'



As the final chapter in the on-again/off-again *Angel Links* saga gets underway, Meifon is not coping with the realization of her true identity very well. She begins by disbanding Angel Links—over—kaput.

Next, in lieu of swallowing a bullet, Meifon packs up her double Ds and... moves to the country? Yep, watching her dear uncle bite the big one fried her circuits all right—but all is not lost. When the Angel Links team bands around her, they give her the courage to go on—to take charge of what little time she has left (those incept dates are a *real* bitch). This leads to her eminent showdown with Goryu, the rat bastard that murdered the entire Lei family when the real Meifon's grand dad turned tale and went legit, abandoning him and the pirate's life they built together.

As expected, Meifon was developed as an instrument of revenge—the ultimate bio-android. She'd either track Goryu down and rip him limb-from-limb within her 17 year life span or simply live (very well, I might add) and die a painless Replicant's death. If only it were that simple.

The terminus apparatus of *Angel Links* is actually quite poetic, and I must say, exceeded my expectations. Albeit a good series, it lacks the polish—and budget—of *Outlaw Star*, so don't expect *War and Peace*. But this finale is both beautiful and brutal in all of the right places. And the animation, while sparse for the most part, shows moments of fluidity when it's needed most. Sunrise squeezed every drop out of the production—contrasting the generally music-blotted overtures, the opening and closing credits are eloquently silent for the final episode, flooding the screen with emotion.

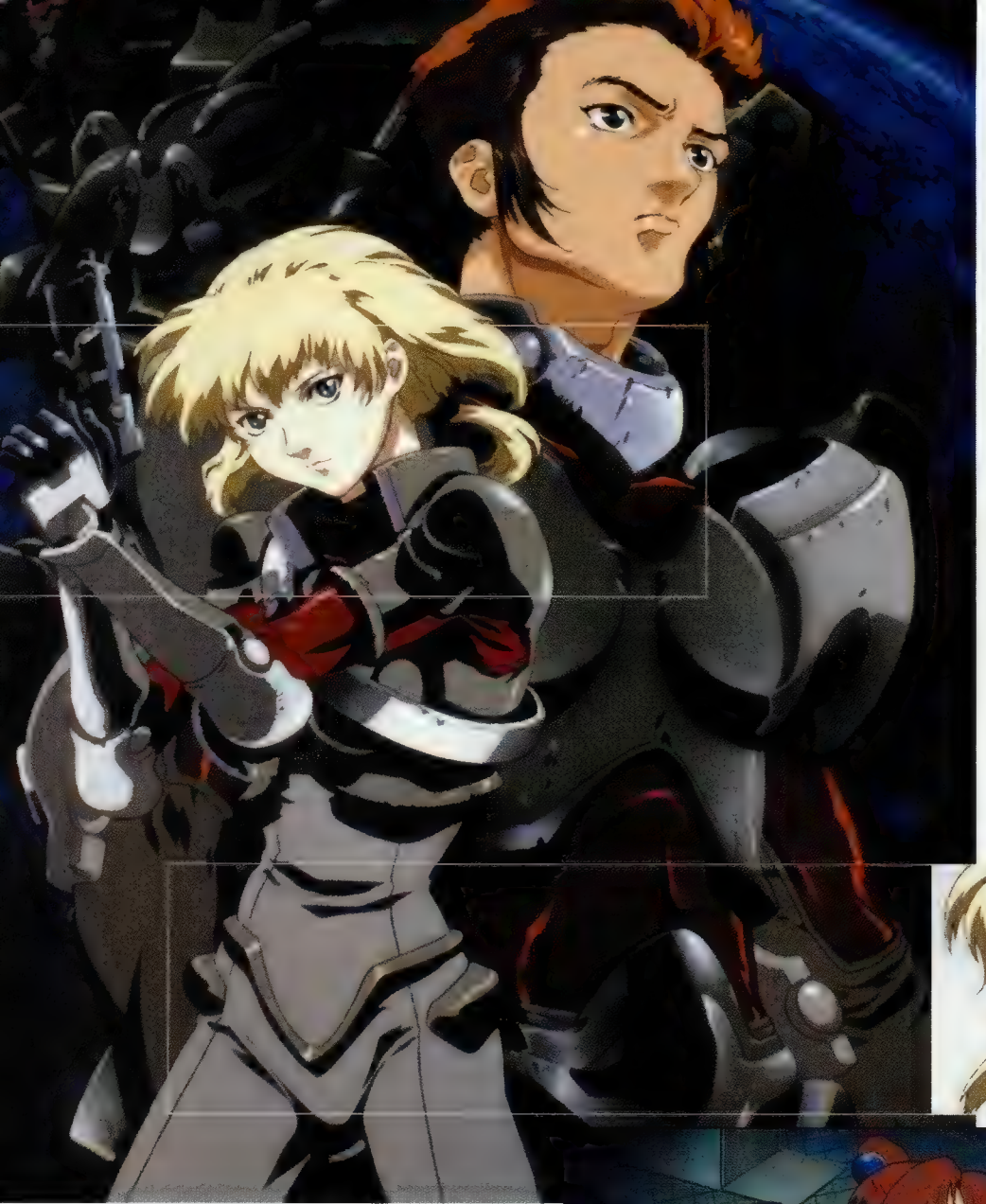
As with the previous episodes, be warned: The English dub alters the mood for the worst. Whenever "Hate me, Meifon, hate me!" turns into "Go ahead, Meifon, make my day!" you know you're in trouble.

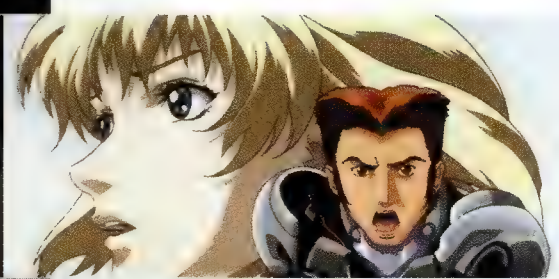
English—off. Subtitles—on.

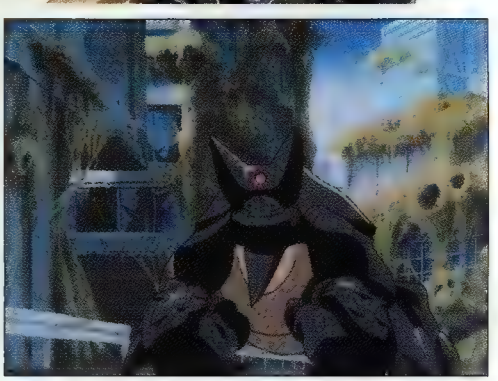
DAVE HALVERSON

BLUE GENDER

FUNimation • AIC/Toshiba EMI
15 & up • 72 min







> 'Tension is constructed slowly and quietly, soldering faint, angelic scores with industrial, electronic rapping'

His disease was terminal. So doctors suggested an advanced form of cryogenics, allowing Yuji's body to rest while a cure was manufactured.

15 years later, amid rampant chaos, a swarm of "blue" awakes him. Their wrath is volatile—their aim: eradication of the human race. Luckily Marlene, member of a rouge task force, rivets into frame to rescue the petrified Yuji. She swats one of the beasts with her mecha arm of steal, extending a stream of blood across the dreary hallway, and pummels others with bullets until they ooze puss and fluid. Appropriately, her surname is Angel.

But it isn't just Yuji that is caught off guard. The viewer, too, is tossed into the futuristic wasteland that is 2031—a barren, desperate globe invested by aliens that chomp on organic *and* inorganic matter as if everything were a bag of M&Ms. Yuji's eyes blink wildly for good reason, because the events of *Blue Gender* unfold as if Hitchcock were directing this invader opera. Tension is constructed slowly and quietly, soldering faint, angelic scores with industrial, electronic rapping. Ambient sounds are used to great advantage as well, consuming the soundtrack with simple yet effective pulses. Gentle footsteps, mechanical humming, slight screeches, subtle jounces—every element is so incredibly simple, that when overlain as an audio-visual whole, eerily profound fear—the heart-racing, nail-biting variety—is the absolute outcome. Even more rigid, each episode concludes on a disheartening, sour note, leaving this critic yearning for more.

Blue Gender is probably best described as an addiction, one that is candy-coated with excellent character development and brushed with the venomous tang of suspense. And rather than blot the DVD with racid promotional sludge, FUNimation recruited Christopher Sabat, *Gender*'s ADR director, along with two of the series' voice actors, to supply an engaging audio commentary over the series' first episode.

JON M GIBSON

NieA_7 vol.2

PIONEER ENTERTAINMENT
NIEA PROJECT • 13 & UP
75 MINS

'NieA is harpooned by discrimination ('_7s' with antenna railroad those without)'

rating

NieA is an emphatically annoying character—her stomach growls perpetually; she's always yearning for food. Maruko, the human harboring the neurotic alien, on the other hand, is always scrounging to purchase her fair share of bread and ramen. But this series isn't as simplistic as "volume one" assumes.

On a visual landscape, even though Yoshitoshi ABe's character designs lose startling emotion from paper to animation, *NieA_7* is still an attractive mesh—but barely collates to his previous work on *Serial Experiments Lain*.

Each episode flows slowly with coming-of-age undertones, offering some comic relief despite mostly subtle drama. Yet, the most oddly engaging element of the show is the Tom Waits-beefed opening song, bellowed in scratchy, Mississippi blues vocals, completely defying the J-Pop rainbow.

JON M GIBSON

VAMPIRE PRINCESS MIYU

TOKYOPOP • HIRAKU OHKOSHI
VHC • 13 & UP • 86 MINS

'The mood is poorly contrived and oddly stoic. Total emotion is lost in Miyu...'

rating

"I don't like him making trouble in my new neighborhood, so we better send the troublemaker home," sounds more like a coined, heavily accented Schwarzenegger tagline than a threat from a stern, post teenage girl. This is the most provocative error in *Vampire Princess*—the mood is poorly contrived and oddly stoic. Total emotion is lost in Miyu, a girl charged with an endless quest to rid the world of evil Shinma. Her personality is dumb and impressionably mechanical, barely characterized as a "loner" just trying to survive a few friendships with Earth girls.

Ultimately, though, the most confusing aspect of Miyu isn't her colorless personality; it's the fact that she attends school during the day while vanishing the undead at night. Why not just slaughter vamps full-time?

At least Blade had an attitude, stockpiling guns on his off time—this slayer is just too mellow.

JON M GIBSON

DETONATOR ORGUN

CENTRAL PARK MEDIA • DARTS/ARTMIC
13 & UP • 150 MINS

rating

'The film has an air of mystery and pacing that's more indicative of live-action than anime'

Central Park Media has unearthed a treasure. Even though it's been around since 1991, the freshness date of *Detonator Orgun* isn't close to running out.

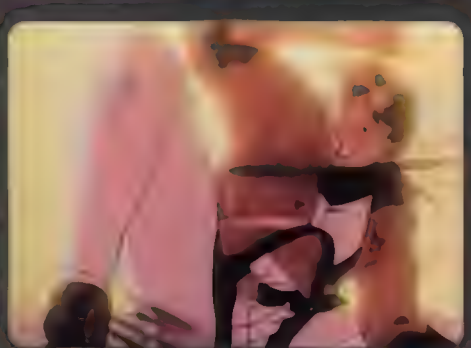
Produced by Masami Obari, the highly skilled artisan behind the *GoShogun*, *Toshinden* and *Fatal Fury* movies, *Orgun* is one of the reasons why he ultimately became so beloved. Not only did it spawn a cool Mega CD game—one of the first digital-comic-style titles to appear on a console—but it's one of the first sci-fi anime to feature a mech syncing perfectly with a human being, a trait that would go on to see many, many transformations (including *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *Pilot Candidate* and *Mizuki*).

The story revolves around a young man who's dreams become reality when he is mysteriously chosen by an alien mechanism to pilot it (via the merging of their two entities) in an attempt to rescue the Earth from a powerful invading force.

Presented in classic sci-fi mode (a la *The Stand*, with an eerie sense of quiet), the film has an air of mystery and pacing that's more indicative of live-action than anime. The DVD is also loaded with vintage extras, including art galleries, ADR scripts and a slew of other essentials.

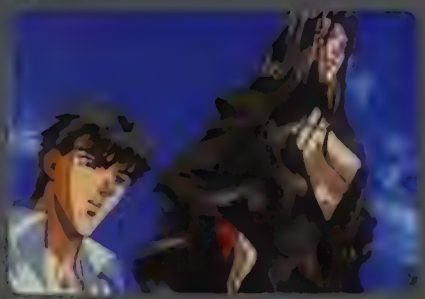
It's a rare bird, to say the least.

DAVE HALVERSON



X

MANGA ENTERTAINMENT
MAD HOUSE • R • 100 MINS



'*X* has one distinct advantage: beautiful, epic animation by Studio Mad House'

rating

Most apocalyptic yarns are fairly engaging, stirring mildly effective drama into massively entertaining destruction. While *X* accomplishes the latter, the film's primary failure is character development. The seven "Dragons of Heaven" and seven "Dragons of Earth," tossed into a bag with leads Kamui, Fuma and Kotori, result in an ultimately underdeveloped plot. 100 minutes just isn't a sufficient running time to frame each individual effectively. Not to say the script isn't intriguing, following the exploits of the DoH as they defend humanity against the DoE, an evil whose sole goal is to protect nature. They are determined to re-grow the planet by way of Armageddon—by wiping out the over-indulgent human race.

So aside from some tight characterization, *X*'s hypnotizing dream sequences and cataclysmic violence justify a viewing...or two.

JON M GIBSON

POWER STONE

ADV FILMS • 16+ • 13 & UP
100 MINS

"...almost a slide show—simplistically drawn with rushed backgrounds..."

rating

Yet another promising video-game format has unfortunately fallen victim to the Saturday morning TV formula. *Power Stone* is minimally animated—this one's almost a slide show—simplistically drawn with rushed backgrounds and is lackluster between opening and closing frames that will [illegible] hardcore anime fans a miracle to endure.

The series follows the exploits of Edward Falcon, the reluctant son of a rich adventurer, and the happenstance after dear old Dad sends him what looks like a rock—but it turns out to be a gem capable of transforming him into a super-fighting machine. He sends the family butler, Apollo, too, who sadly proves to be more interesting. Not even Rouge's sexy abs and ADV's sexy packaging can save this shaky video-game adaptation from its disappointing fate.

DAVE HALVERSON

PRINCESS NINE

ADV FILMS • PHOENIX ENTERTAINMENT
12 & UP • 125 MINS

rating

'Expose an innocent anime producer to cheesy American baseball movies—and voila—you get *Princess Nine*'

Mua-ha-ha! The process is complete! We have successfully infiltrated Japan with boring American sports! Soon we will import bowling; then we can steal the real Godzilla suit while they're inebriated with mind-numbing activities!

Expose an innocent anime producer to cheesy American baseball movies like *Field of Dreams* and *A League of their Own*—and voila—you get *Princess Nine*. A golf anime can't be far behind!

In this sparsely animated tale of teen girl power and peer pressure, the cosmopolitan head mistress of a prestigious all-female high school decides it's high time Japan got itself an all-girl Baseball team. Her intentions are honorable enough—to return a young girl to the mound to honor her departed dad, a baseball great that never got the chance to shine—but her methods are not.

You'll experience Rosie and Madonna flashbacks as you witness the token washed-up alcoholic coach, the tried-and-true simpleton and every other rags-to-riches sports analogy you can shake a bat at. However, between pitch-offs and atypical teen angst, the overall production is surprisingly stylish and heroin Ryo Hayakawa's story is squishy sweet.

If not for the boozer coach, this would be a great anime for the kids. As it stands, though, I'm not sure where *Princess Nine* falls. Do anime fans dig baseball? Will the *Sailor Moon* set take a swing? I say, "Batter out!"

DAVE HALVERSON

BLOOD THE LAST VAMPIRE

MANGA ENTERTAINMENT • I.G. PLUS • 17 X 23" • 48 MINS.

rating

Directed in muted color schemes, *Blood* is something of a marvel for anime junkies. Its guts are rooted in Cold War tension—a mystery- and spy-covered environment that is represented in magazine and fluid animation.

But it is the passion of a cryptic young woman, Saya—cloaked in rage—that draws viewers close to this 50-minute romp. She slanders vampire—or a demonic breed, rather—with the blunt edge of her sword, slicing through to their very core. Inasmuch split, vampires burn.

The setting plays another potent character, focused solely on a remote Yokosuka Halloween evening during which the vamps pounce. Most of the school-age partygoers don't glance twice at the fellow costumed, assuming a fellow participant in the spirit of the holiday. Even more deceiving: Two lascivious disguise themselves as students at the Yokota Air Force base, requiring Saya to pose as a school girl—an alias she displaces—and vanquish the monsters.

In the overall scheme of things, the action of *Blood* is frantic, jarring and extremely enjoyable to watch—especially as it is presented in a very smooth, digitally animated method. But with such beautiful eye-candy—foreboding architecture and classic decor that is eerily effective—there is no room for dramatic development. Saya slays the creatures of the night, and that one credits role.

> "...with such beautiful eye-candy—foreboding architecture and classic decor that is eerily effective—there is no room for dramatic development."

With a dash more theatrics—mostly to shed light on Saya's mysterious origin—*Blood* could have been a masterpiece of the macabre.

Jon M Gibson

'BLOOD' GIVEAWAY!

[1] - GRAND PRIZE:

Blood theatrical poster signed by the director, *Blood* DVD; (5) other manga DVDs (of winner's choosing); and a Manga gift pack.

[5] - FIRST PRIZE:

Blood theatrical poster signed by the director; *Blood* DVD.

[5] - SECOND PRIZE:

Blood theatrical poster signed by the director; *Blood* VHS.

Name_____

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Please mail entry form to PLAY Magazine, Blood Contest, 31255 Cedar Valley Drive, Suite 313, Westlake Village, CA 91362—or e-mail all of the above info to: manga@play-magazine.com. No purchase necessary. Winners will be notified via e-mail.

ONE MAN'S 'ANGEL'

a conversation with **kia asamiya**
as told to **enrique galvez**

Among comic and manga fans, Kia Asamiya's name is growing into a domestic franchise. Most recently, readers were treated to his most personal creation, *Dark Angel* (available from Image Comics). But his other notable works, including his adaptation of *Star Wars* into a manga, *Silent Mobius*, *Steam Detectives* and *Nadesico*, have gained followers all their own. Currently, his company, Studio Tron, is partnered with Fanboy Entertainment (www.fanboyinc.com) for his latest mini-series, *Dark Angel: Phoenix Resurrection*.

Anime patrons might also recognize Asamiya as Kikuchi Michitaka, an alter ego he adopted when working as an animator/character designer on *Detonator Orgun* and *Hades Project Zeorymer*. To sooth our curiosity, the veteran of the drawing board took a few minutes away from his hectic schedule to answer our questions about manga—and other things anime:

***Dark Angel* is a beautiful book and can only increase you're U.S. fan base. It's been a while since we have seen a colorized manga of its kind. Did it turn out the way you wanted?**
KA: Yes, for the most part. As I am not coloring it myself, it is not exactly the way I would have done it—but in ways, that's a good thing. JD Smith is an amazing colorist and does things in Photoshop with clouds and water that I am not capable of. He's awesome! We work very closely together on the coloring. JD has come to know what I want and expect in *Dark Angel*. On the other hand, I also have grown into his style of coloring and know what can and can't be done. For example, when we started I used to give him lots of detailed instructions on how I wanted the clouds and skies in each panel to look. Now, as he knows what I want and I know what he can do, I can just generally describe what I want and he usually nails it.

What is your opinion of past colorized works such as *Silent Mobius* (Viz)?
KA: They were good for what colorists were capable of at that time. They did a great job of coloring over the zipatone I use so heavily in my art.

You released a color version of *Steam Detectives* that is amazing. Any chance that we will ever see it released in the States?
KA: Thank you. Yes, you will be seeing *Steam Detectives* in color in the U.S. in the near future. We are working on that now. It will be some of what you saw in the Japanese color version and some newly colored material as well.

'contribution.' (Laughs) I loved every minute of it. DC is very happy with it as well. You should be seeing it here in America in English by the end of the year or early 2002. This is hopefully the first of many Batman projects you will be seeing from me. I have something lined up already, actually, but it's a secret. (Laughs) The way it came about is a long story, but here's the short version: Kodansha was launching a new monthly comic called *Magazine Z* which they wanted me to be a part of. The editors wanted me to contribute a new series, but I was just so busy—I was going to have to decline. They then asked if there was anything at all I could do, anything I could draw, what would it be? I said Batman as a joke because I didn't think it would be possible. Next thing I know, I get a call saying they were talking to DC about a Batman manga. Then, after a few trips to New York and numerous meetings, we got the go-ahead and the deal was signed.

***Silent Mobius* is one of your more popular titles in the states—any plans for a third film? How do you feel about the *Silent Mobius* TV series?**
KA: No plans for a third film at this time, but there have been a few discussions about it. As far as the anime series is concerned, as with any of my creations, I loved seeing *Silent Mobius* turned into an anime series. I was busy at that time with other projects, though, and my involvement was more limited than I would have liked it to have been. Honestly? I think it could have been done much better.

Will there be any animated versions of *Dark Angel*?
KA: Hopefully, yes. That is something else we are working on. Any

I lost interest in *Star Wars* until I saw your manga interpretations. How did this come about? Are you a fan of the *Star Wars* films? Which is your favorite?
KA: I love *Star Wars*! Those films had a huge impact on me. As for my favorite, it's too hard for me to say which I like best. I can't choose just one.

Did you visit the Skywalker Ranch to meet the man himself?
KA: I did, indeed, visit Skywalker Ranch. I spent about two weeks there collecting reference for the *Episode One* manga. I couldn't take anything back with me, so I would go every day and look at all the art and designs and draw as much as I could. I never saw the movie, though—not until it came out in theaters. I drew the manga not having seen it. Unfortunately, I did not get a chance to meet George Lucas himself...yet.

How do you feel about your contribution to the Batman legacy? How did the Batman project come about?
KA: I am proud of what I did with *Batman*—14 parts, 350 pages—that's quite a

investors out there reading this? (Laughs)

Are there any current artists working in the field that you admire or find interesting?
KA: I really do not watch anime or read manga. I admire more Western artists than Japanese—like Moebius (whom I had the pleasure of meeting earlier this year!), Alex Ross, Mike Mignola, Bruce Timm, Travis Charest, Simon Bisley, Joe Mandura...

What are some of the future projects we can expect from you on the U.S. side?
KA: Hopefully my Batman manga will be on sale in America soon. There is also *Steam Detectives* in color coming, which I mentioned earlier. Of course, *Dark Angel* will continue in color from Image. I am illustrating covers for the DC Comics series, *The Titans*, beginning with issue 32. I have a new *Star Wars* story that will appear in *Star Wars Tales* from Dark Horse soon. There should also be another Batman project before too long, as well as an upcoming "dream project" for me from another U.S. publisher. I guess we'll just have to wait and see...

movies

SLAYERS PREMIUM

Slayers Premium isn't really a movie—it's a 30 minute short that will be shown as part of a triple feature in theaters this winter. As such, it's going to be quick on action and heavy on slapstick. Not that that's a bad thing—ever since its inception, *Slayers* has been like *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* meets *Record of Lodoss War*, fantasy that's funny, silly and—at times—epic.

This is the story: Peripatetic travelers Lina Inverse and Gourry Gabriev, a master sorceress and a dumb-but-skilled swordsman, go to a little oceanside town that labors under a curse—the curse of the octopus. Whomever eats a tentacled beast is rendered incapable of speaking, left able to communicate *only* with other octopods. Gourry, the pig that he is, eats octopus meat and becomes incoherent—which isn't much different from his usual self.

Hilarity is expected to ensue.

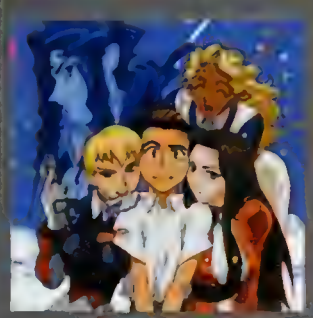
JEFF CHEN

Overseas exposed

Japanese TV is fueled by animation. Instead of being soaked in *Bob Patterson* and other miscellaneous spin-offs—a pitfall of American TV—the satellites overseas receive transmissions of beautiful, fluid anime. Here are a few choice selections from this season:

AIC has announced a new *Tenchi Muyo* series (big surprise) entitled *Tenchi Muyo! GXP*. Strangely enough, it has almost nothing to do with Tenchi and friends—rather, there's a boy who looks suspiciously like him who is affiliated with the Galaxy Police. But AIC producing a third OVA series seems like overkill. In addition to *Tenchi* galore, the company is also testing the waters on the Internet with a November broadcast of *Mahou Yuugi* (roughly translated as *Magical Witchland*), its 2D/3D toon-shaded anime series on Lycos Japan (mahoyugi.lycos.co.jp).

Unfortunately, most series in Japan began in October, so there isn't much new anime airing in the November/December time period. However, these current shows are worth your attention:



X, the TV adaptation, plays more true to CLAMP's manga series than the movie ever did. For *Giant Robo* fans, be sure to check out *Babel II - Beyond Infinity*, which comes from Mitsuteru Yokoyama, the man behind the original *GR* series.

The holidays also mean movies and this December's going to be chock full of feature-length fare. Miyazaki's latest film, *Sen to Chihiro* (*Spirited Away*), will probably continue chugging until the end of the year—a success of *Titanic* proportions. Other films to note: the new *Sakura Taisen* movie based on the third game in the popular Sega romance/mech strategy series; and *Inu Yasha - Toki o omeru omoi* (*Love Which Transcends Time*), an original story based off Rumiko Takahashi's manga series.

And it's no doubt that Japanese retail chains will be stocked with all things anime come December, from licensed merchandise to DVDs.

JEFF CHEN

tv series

FINAL FANTASY UNLIMITED

Although there's a game in development with Sakaguchi's fingerprints on it, *Final Fantasy: Unlimited* has nothing to do with the games, the movie or the previous OVA series. Animated by Studio GONZO, a real up-and-comer in the anime world (most famous stateside for Bandai's *Blue Submarine No. 6*), this cel and CG-animated series is an interesting 52-episode alternate world saga.

Somewhere in the Sea of Japan, a massive, black pillar appears—a dimensional portal, serving primarily as a doorway for itinerant monsters. But Dr. Hayakawa and his wife—who studied the pillar—made a trip into it and never returned. So their children, Yu and Ai, board an inter-dimensional train and travel to the other world. They team up with Risa and Kaze, two inhabitants of the alternate universe, to search for parents, homelands and other things fantastical.

JEFF CHEN

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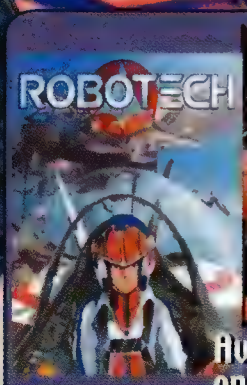

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PLANET OF THE APES

20th CENTURY FOX
RATED PG-13

PLAY: It's a matter of Then vs. Now. But a majority of movie buffs would probably chose Charleton Heston—the wild, lunatic Heston, howling at a collapsed, disparaged Statue of Liberty—to rein victorious. His exaggerated curses, blunt and extended—even with poor special effects—are far superior to Tim Burton's concoction of hair and havoc. Yet, besides a volatile ending, one that attempts to be as suspenseful as the original, the visuals are like fireworks. It's dazzling to witness Tim Roth as a sinister chimpanzee; and to greater surprise, a completely capable Mark Wahlberg holding his own onscreen. There's no human/ape roll in the hay, but as pure escapism, this *Planet of the Apes* manages to strike a subtle cord (minus many contrived allusions to the original).

VALUE: "13 hours of primate-packed extras," tots the back cover, which sounds more like an exceptionally long film studies course than a DVD. Just be sure to listen to Burton's commentary—an insightful audio trip from the mind of a cinema king—and watch Paul Oakenfold's "Rule the Planet Remix," an eclectic music video experience. When considering other summer movie fare, *Planet* is probably your best bet for big action *and* supplements.

JON M GIBSON

MOVIE
DVD

THE MATRIX REVISITED

20th CENTURY FOX
RATED PG-13

PLAY: Since the granddaddy of sci-fi sequels won't park into theaters until 2003, Warner has amassed this supplement disc chock-full of all things *Matrix*. Those who might be skeptical should dive in with a fresh outlook—because even though *Revisited* might seem like an attempt to capitalize on the success of the Neo-driven franchise, it is actually an insightful experience. Viewers are treated to a two-hour-plus mining of the original film, starting with the pitch process of the Wachowski brothers (the studio was ultimately perplexed by the screenplay), a collage of the kung-fu workshop process (Keanu Reaves can't kick), ground-breaking cinemagraphic techniques (being the creation of "bullet-time" photography), and the establishment of sound (those eerie, creepy noises that defined the different realities of the film).

VALUE: Extremely cool—but all too brief—is the featurette, "What is Animatrix?," touching on an upcoming series of anime shorts based in the *Matrix* universe. "True Followers" interviews a handful of Internet gurus that connected via the film's official website. And, of course, there is a musical montage of footage from *The Matrix Reloaded*—slamming into theaters *not* so soon.

JON M GIBSON

MOVIE
DVD

RUSH HOUR 2

NEW LINE
RATED PG-13

PLAY: Chris Tucker—pocketing a cool $20 mil for his black-man-in-China performance—rolls with the punches; and Jackie Chan, without the aid of wires or computer wizardry, mixes in playful action—but he's still in better mode as Drunken Master. And as far as Asian actresses go, Zhang Ziyi (*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*) is miles ahead of the rest. She kicks, she bats her lashes and she flaunts he curves. So regardless of the movie's throw-away plot and various sing-along moments, *Rush Hour 2* is actually an enjoyable ride—just drop your Kubrick frame of mind and think in *Lethal Weapon* mode. It's only a matter of time before this mismatched duo invades New York to round out the trilogy. But by then they will have probably worn out their welcome.

VALUE: Although it is charged with an array of behind-the-scenes featurettes—and an InfiniFilm sticker—this isn't a disc you buy for extras. *Rush Hour* is more about the cast's chemistry than on-set inspiration. Though, the main menu does feature a very cool, spinning Chinese take-out carton.

JON M GIBSON

MOVIE
DVD

THE GRINCH

UNIVERSAL
RATED PG

PLAY: Totally whimsical and true to the great author Dr. Seuss, *The Grinch* is definitely a must-own for the holidays. Jim Carry is spectacular as the sinister green one (with a heart two sizes too small), the special effects and make-up are amazing, and the entire film is entirely true to the Seussical world. Remember watching the vintage *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* as a half-hour cartoon? This feature-length version relays the same nostalgic feelings and, undoubtedly, will paste a smile on your face—and maybe even a laugh.

VALUE: All kinds of special features are crammed on this disc. They're jammed and slammed and rammed on this disc. There are documentaries and filmographies and biographies galore—there are even some Who-ville holiday recipes and more! There are outtakes and deleted scenes—this disc is bursting at the seams. It's a DVD with great special treatment; nearly a perfect ten on the scale of...DVD-good-eatment.

PHIL HORNSHAW

MOVIE ●●●●●
DVD ●●●●◐

JURRASIC PARK 3

UNIVERSAL
RATED PG-13

PLAY: Merely a product of sequelitis—not the unfortunate brainchild of Crichton or Spielberg—*JP3* is difficult to judge under interrogation room gloom. Basically, it's a big budget B-movie with big B-deemed stars (Sam Neill, reprising his role as Dr. Grant, even though his previously intelligent speech is dumbed down; William H. Macy and Tea Leoni as an adventurous yet reluctant couple; and even a cameo from Laura Dern). Several years of tech evolution is translated on-screen in form of dinos by the dozens, including flying pteranodons and the violent spinosaurus. Sure, the plot is a bit campy and the humor is wry, but *JP3* did its job effectively, providing a 90-minute trek through the jungle for theatergoers nationwide—but it's not quite the same on the small screen.

VALUE: Besides the generic behind-the-scenes garble, a tour of Stan Winton's creature studio is ripe with intrigue, along with a feature-length commentary for fans that wish to delve into the greatest depth of the *Jurassic* saga. Other supplements include a ride through the halls of ILM and a few "making-of" shorts. But there's no trailer for *JP4*—yet.

JON M GIBSON

MOVIE ●●●●●
DVD ●●●●●

SWORDFISH

WARNER BROS.
RATED R

PLAY: "If it were any hotter, you'd burst into flames," boasts Mike Sargent, WBAI-FM, as quoted on the DVD box. Sadly, though, *Swordfish* loses all its allure the moment Halle Berry walks out of frame. Her body is godly—curvaceous and cool—but an hourglass figure can't save a disastrous screenplay (one that actually scored scribe Skip Woods a studio contract). Hacking interfaces are Hollywood-ized, showcased most fatuously by a techno-coated sequence in which Hugh Jackman dances with the keyboard (and with himself—literally). From there, John Travolta attempts to carry his mastermind, covert agent of a character into *Pulp Fiction* territory, but lacks the stamina that Vincent Vega once had. However, most inferior are *Swordfish*'s high-tech special effects, often pushing the limit in grandeur, but ultimately losing sight of an action movie's goal: Excitement.

VALUE: Judging by the lackluster DVD menus—static with a simple music backdrop—Warner Bros. didn't expense much to make up for the film's muddy plot. At least a featurette focused on the "chopper-lifting-bus" sequence was included. Plus, an audio commentary from director Dominic Sena doesn't impair the mix—but doesn't improve it much either.

JON M GIBSON

MOVIE ●●◐●●
DVD ●●◐●●

TOTAL RECALL

ARTISAN
RATED R

PLAY: Director Paul Vernhoeven has two identities: mild porn provocateur (*Showgirls*) and sci-fi god (*Robocop*, *Starship Troopers*). So in the vein of the later genre—but with a hint of nudity spattered in-between—the fearless director presents fantasy freaks with an unforgettable mind trip. Adapted from the stellar short story, "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale," by master yarn-spinner Phillip K. Dick *(Blade Runner)*, *Total Recall* chronicles the adventures of Arnold Schwarzenegger, a staple of the action climate, through a hostile Martian landscape.

VALUE: Though it may not seem like a rarity, Schwarzenegger contributes to a fascinating commentary, paired with Vernhoeven, which ultimately culminates as a 113-minute crash-course in filmmaking. "Imagining *Total Recall*" allow other sides of the production to tell their tales, too—especially humorous notes about the entire crew getting sick while shooting in Mexico. Plus, don't forget the amazing Dolby 5.1 mix or widescreen halo.

JON M GIBSON

MOVIE ●●●●●
DVD ●●●●●

TOYS

TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX
RATED PG

PLAY: With the kind of fan base and respect in the film industry that Robin Williams has, taking a few years off is something earned; unfortunately, *Toys* is certainly not an example of a movie that helped earn him a break. What would appear to be a modern day *Willy Wonka*, Oscar-winner Barry Levinson lost much in *Toys'* translation from screenplay to movie. Williams is a bright spot among poor acting, shoddy cinematography, dreadful music and editing that leaves gapping holes in the would-be plot. At times you can almost see Levinson's artistic vision, but it's too inconsistent and perhaps just too weird to appreciate. A headache inducing lack of fun, you'll be wishing for credits faster than you can wind up a cymbal-wielding monkey.

VALUE: Special features consisting of nothing more than the expected: trailers, subtitles (English and Spanish), French dubbing and TV spots; Fox did little to no good in assisting an already poor movie. But then again, who would want any more of this movie, anyway? Perhaps if it was packaged with some Tylenol.

NICK HURWITCH

MOVIE ●●●●●
DVD ●●●●●

EMPIRE OF THE SUN

WARNER BROS.
RATED PG

PLAY: From all angles, *Empire of the Sun* is an epic Spielberg journey through soul and spirit. It pits young Britan Jim Graham (portrayed incredibly well by then-newcomer Christian Bale) against a nation consumed by battle as he is torn away from his family and condemned to a Japanese internment camp during World War II. The visuals are stimulating; the performances are superb. And most surprising is the extreme levels of brutality exhibited in a film that was granted a PG rating during its 1987 release. Like *Saving Private Ryan*, the reckless abandon and utter chaos of combat is explored—but more importantly, humanity is thrust into survival mode. Prepubescent Jim is abruptly throttled from an opulent private school into a barbwire cage.

VALUE: Spielberg has yet to sit down and take advantage of the commentator's microphone, but an aged—yet in-depth—documentary, "The China Odyssey," is supplied as research material. Narrator Martin Sheen takes viewers on an hour-long stroll through the hard-boiled nature of the film, tapping author—and real-life Jim—J.G. Ballard to tell his harrowing tale.

JON M GIBSON

MOVIE ●●●●◐
DVD ●●◐●●

THE SIMPSONS: SEASON 1

20th CENTURY FOX
RATED PG-13

PLAY: "With 280-odd shows in the can and no end in sight, you might be able to complete your *Simpsons* DVD collection just before the next format comes along," chugs Matt Groening in the liner notes of this long-awaited, 3-disc set. Fox has amassed all 13 episodes from the pilot season, including the unforgettable "Bart the General," an homage to the late Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, and "Life in the Fast Lane," featuring the first of many great *Simpsons'* guest voices, Albert Brooks.

VALUE: Compliments must be paid to the creators for being honest. During commentaries on *every* episode, Groening and pals aren't afraid to admit they didn't know what they hell they were doing in 1989. Primetime animation, rolling at 30 frames per second, was an elusive monster to the entire crew—character designs and layouts were inconsistent and rough. Scrutiny is not withheld. Plus, "America's First Family," produced by the BBC, offers a glimpse behind the scenes. And there is plenty more, including scripts, outtakes, and spiffy easter eggs.

JON M. GIBSON

MOVIE ●●●●●
DVD ●●●◐●

LARA CROFT: TOMB RAIDER

PARAMOUNT
RATED PG-13

PLAY: As far as videogame-based movies go—and that's usually swirling down the toilet—*Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* stands atop the heaping mound. In terms of action and adventure, it is a slick, stylish and overall fun day at the movies. When critics pounded *Lara*, there were two factions: The usual stuffy naysayers looking for War and Peace in their action; and the rest of us—adrenaline junkies that dig nothing more than technodripping, high-technology and stuff blowin' up. In the back of my mind, I wondered how I'd take on the stone monkey boss and hoped Core would have enough polys left over to smooth out Lara's assets and turn her high beams on in cold weather. If you fell prey to those stick-in-the-mud reviews, do take this opportunity to soak it all in. Angelina Jolie does Lara complete justice in a role that fits her like a *really* tight, black tank top.

VALUE: An explosive film, plus a tombful (sorry) of extras (see pg. 88) makes this one of the year's most well endowed DVDs.

DAVE HALVERSON

MOVIE ●●●●●
DVD ●●●●◐

Tomb Raider's DVD menus (pictured above) were so time-consuming, 1K began production before the film was released theatrically

EXHUMING 'CROFT'

Lara Croft: Her British rhythm; her body, full of bounce and beauty—the woman that defied the 2001 clash of the comebacks, challenging dinos (*JP3*), mismatched sidekicks (*Rush Hour 2*) and gross, sexual puns (*Scary Movie 2*). But besides being a box office champ, laden in gravity-defying acrobatics and the attitude-painted leer of Angelina Jolie, *Tomb Raider* is also this season's most ambitious DVD.

It sparks cutting edge design *and* substantial extras, complimenting the mythology and motion of the film. "Are You Game?," a mini-documentary, explores the phenomenon that is Lara. Here, the evolution of the videogame is itemized, dipping into the creative cookie jars at Eidos Interactive (ironically, the voluptuous heroine was originally supposed to be a mighty hero—modeled like Indiana Jones—but was rendered into a female in a week's notice).

"In order to pack the disc with added-value content, we had to be very sparing with the amount of video space we took up for the menus," spouts Matt Kennedy, Co-Founder and CEO of 1K Studios, the artistic warehouse behind *Tomb Raider*'s stellar menu interface. "This is a common problem because you want to use as much bit-space as possible to make the movie look great, but you also want to put on lots of features and have cool menus."

An resourceful feat, the stately—yet simple—interface by 1K allowed for U2's "Elevation: Tomb Raider Mix," an alternative main title sequence, four deleted scenes (all appropriately cut for pacing reasons; but most showcase an ultra-fiery Jolie, lashing opposition with her wicked tongue) and a few more featurettes—"Digging Into," "The Stunts of" and "The Visual Effects of"—to be burned onto the DVD. But most impressive is "Crafting Lara Croft," a deceivingly basic featurette that delves fairly deep into the three-month rigor of Jolie's training—the pain, the pleasure and the ultimate payoff all captured on film.

Then once the visual fascination dies, and you've navigated the many caverns on the disc (including several Easter eggs), director Simon West commentates for 100 minutes, delving into the videogame essence of the film—the stunts, the style and the sexy heroine headlining the project.

And further emphasizing innovation—and the ever-popular embrace of interactivity—PC users are treated to a DVD premiere. Grabbing a joystick—or keyboard—allows players to romp with three levels of *Tomb Raider Chronicles*, installed with the click of a button.

"We are at an interesting point historically in the evolution of home entertainment," illustrates Martin Blythe, Vice President, Publicity, Paramount Home Entertainment. "DVDs, like movies, can never be fully interactive in the same way games can. They offer a different experience. With *Tomb Raider*, I definitely think we are looking at a hybrid of the two."

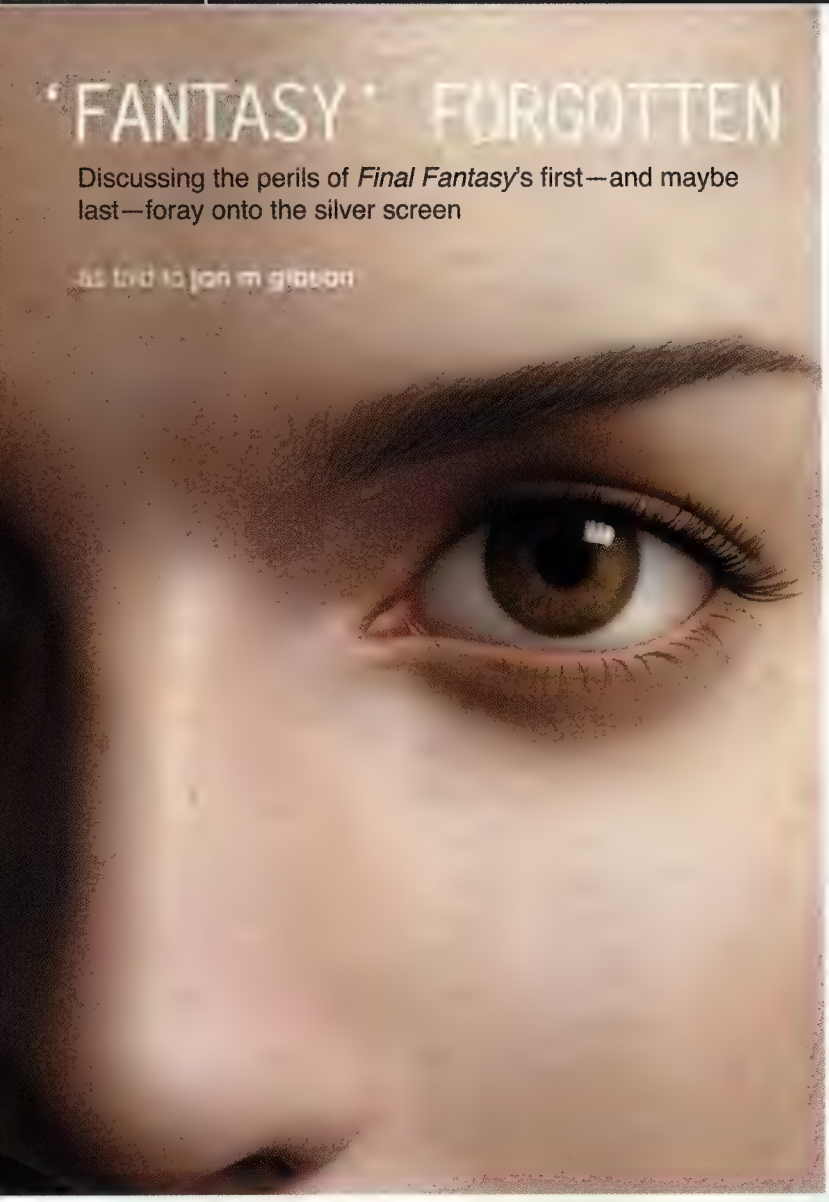
Innovation: Just another lively, geared reason to own the digital version of Ms. Croft—or any DVD, for that matter—instead of VHS.

JON M GIBSON

'FANTASY' FORGOTTEN

Discussing the perils of *Final Fantasy*'s first—and maybe last—foray onto the silver screen

as told to jon m gibson



Seemingly limitless hours of supplements can be housed on a 5-inch disc, allowing film buffs to mine the thought streams of filmmakers. But *Final Fantasy* represents a change of pace for the medium. Hironobu Sakaguchi, director of *The Spirits Within*, thinks the format will help his film—a gorgeous example of the power of computer-generated animation—find the audience it missed in theaters.

***Tomb Raider*, which was heavily based on the videogame, opened at $48 million. *Final Fantasy*, a delicate, inspired, absolutely stunning film—to say the least—banked far less. Do you think the movie would have opened much bigger had it been based on either *FF7* or *FF9* and not an entirely original concept?**

HS: Every *Final Fantasy* game title has a different set of characters and stories. So the original story for this movie was no exception, and I don't think that was the reason for it not doing well in the U.S. box office. In fact, it did quite well in the European and Asian markets. I'm guessing there are other factors contributing to the box office numbers in the U.S.

If nothing else, *Final Fantasy* was a benchmark film technically. Will Square Pictures take what they have learned with this experience and take another shot at bringing the franchise to the big screen?

HS: I cannot comment on the next project at this time, but we are currently in pre-production, negotiating with Columbia Pictures regarding possibilities for several projects. I would like to keep challenging the film industry.

Will we ever see the amazing Dr. Aki Ross again?

HS: Yes, quite possibly. One of the projects I'm thinking about is a detective story with Aki as a detective and Gray as a mafia boss. We are considering the usage of the characters—not just in a video game—but also in different media.

What was the most difficult detail to achieve when working on the CGI of *Final Fantasy*—hair, skin, eyes?

HS: I think it was hair. An average human has about 100,000 strands of hair and Aki has 60,000 strands hair—which comes very close to the real thing. It's a lot to work for the artists. Also, the expression of wrinkles of cloth is very difficult to do in CG. We even developed proprietary software for cloth simulation.

How far into the future of CG will we not be able to tell the difference between animation and live-action? Obviously, *Final Fantasy* was the first step in this direction.

HS: I think it is possible within the next 10 years—to create exceedingly photo-real CG—given the advancement of hardware, especially in rendering technologies. But it will take a lot of time, effort and money, so it would also depend on whether anyone wants to try it.

Was there much doubt that your animators could create such an amazing film when the project was first pitched?

HS: Yes, I believe there were many doubts. In fact, it was six months before the release of the film when even I finally felt confident that I could finish the film. It was very difficult to start up the production because we were a new studio without any experience that was about to begin a new project that nobody [had] challenged before. We had a very hard time in the beginning trying to recruit talented artists and moving things forward.

Do you honestly believe that actors might be replaced by animated counterparts in the distant future?

HS: I don't think so. We need the talent of live actors even when we create CG characters. And some stories can be conveyed well to the audience only by live-action film. I believe CG film is just another genre of film, and it will continue to forge its own path alongside live-action films.

DOUBLE THREAT

Alias vaults ahead of the network grind, pushing action and drama envelopes

Sydney Bristow, an attractive dynamo with a wounded heart, living life between aggressive techno beats, treads as if Confidence were her mother and Cool, her father. But more intriguing then her radiant smile or skin-tight threads—and more so than the intellectual package she carts *wherever* she treks—is her after-school job. Unlike other grad students—those bookworms compelled to study by means of espresso shots—she jimmies the security grids of Chinese embassies and tackles political assassins in Prague.

A bit absurd—but enduring to the core—the plot isn't like that of other network shows this season (actually, it's quite cinematic, considering the series is shot on 35MM stock). Fox attempted to blend a hottie into an actioner with *Dark Angel*, a blasphemous sci-fi byproduct that suffers from dreadful hip-hop drama and slim-to-nil energy. Touted as a *Matrix*-enhanced festival of tits and testosterone, the series adopted a *Dawson's Creek* subplot as a primary script by its season finale. But Sydney and gang fill the gap—a gap long overdue for filling.

Thankfully, the *Alias* teleplay thickens quickly, revealing by the first episode's closure that the beautiful Sydney (played with precision by the sportive Jennifer Garner), an agent of SD-6, a top-secret division of the CIA, is actually spying for the enemy—unintentionally, of course. Coincidentally, without warning, her father reveals that he has been a double operative for the CIA his entire life, probing to collapse the intricate weavings of SD-6. Sydney—like father, like daughter—follows in his noble, yet hazardous, footsteps.

A rouge intelligence bureau, sledgehammer-whacked combat, and a tough-as-bullets heroine clad in a new set of disguises—blonde wigs, foreign accents, cocktail dresses—every week; that's *Alias*.

But the show does more than harness a black-eye mentality—it alludes to the colorless octane of timeless American serials: *Flash Gordon*, *Superman*. Each hour-long adrenaline rush weighs on the breaks at full speed come curtain call, depositing a tension-drenched cliffhanger.

TV hasn't aired such apex energy in over a decade.

JON M GIBSON

'JACK' SHIFT

Cartoon Network adopts the grandeur of David Lean and sharpens a katana—all in the name of animation

Cartoon Network executives must be smirking—in fact, they've probably been asserting a perfect, undaunted grimace for quite some time.

Enter *Samurai Jack*, a well-groomed, extraordinarily bold new project that dares to define the rough climate of animation today—a vicious, stirring panoply of pencil, paint, color and churning innovation. Taking a brief glance at the show's lead temper—the rigid, resolute Jack—lends viewers an indelible impression. His eyes are focused, scorching with contempt. He is vengeance personified.

"I studied a lot of Kurosawa pictures; and also David Lean—especially for the environments, because I *really* wanted to make the environments a character and he's *so* good at that, with *Lawrence of Arabia* with the desert and *Dr. Zhviago* with Russia. It was really amazing," Genndy Tartakovsky, the creator of *Jack*, illustrates. "I really love the way I felt when I watched those movies because I love exploring new worlds and new lands."

Those aren't words generally associated with the man responsible for Cartoon Network's other smashes, the mischievous *Dexter's Laboratory* and the lollipop farce, *Powerpuff Girls*. But Tartakovsky's goal for his new project was cinematic to the core—to shrink the dominance and energy of the silver-screen epic onto the 27-inch TV propped in your living room set-up, soaked in aplomb. So after years of toiling away at the conception board, simmering the notion of a stylized action show, katana-wielding Jack emerged.

"Because it's a visual show and a visual medium, I wanted the visuals to tell the story—rather than dialogue or any of that. We tell stories in a cinematic way in the best film gram-

mar that we know."

The first episode opens with the young warrior witnessing the violent demise of his father at the hands of Aku, a sinister, shadow-born demon. Bitten by rancor, Jack escapes to be educated by the world with a solitary objective in deposit—slaughtering the baneful, foreboding creature that swallowed his father's soul. He studies archery and nobility with merry Robin Hood, as well as patience and deep concentration from stereotypical monks—all presented in an amazing flight of fancy, dripping with visual elegance and absolutely no dialogue. World beat-drums and acoustic rhythm dominates the stereo track, adhering to Tartakovsky's motion picture approach. But to make things rather unpredictable, Jack is warped into the distant future seconds before achieving ultimate victory.

Alas, Aku fever is rampant in the *Blade Runner*-esque tar pit that is the dateless morrow. The demon's trademarked image is plastered on cereal boxes, billboards, soft drinks and underwear. His dominance is superlative. His ego: a choking, incendiary, self-righteous abyss.

Jack is lost in terror and—conveniently cultivating the show in a futuristic landscape, permitting exquisite experimentation channels.

"Especially after doing *Dexter's* and *Powerpuff* [which are] quick cutting, I definitely wanted to slow down the pacing a little bit," Tartakovsky relates. "I wanted to take some time to develop things. Because they are half-hour episodes, we tried to do really, really simple stories. So instead of doing plot points, we can just do great eye-candy and great visuals. We'll have three minutes of an army marching, where before we would only do 10 seconds."

So rather than concentrate on POW-brief one-liners and goofy comedy, *Jack* jumps to the forefront of animated action shows. There are no superheroes wearing bubblegum-red tights. The only warrior is Jack—the dedicated, crafty swordsman from feudal Japan.

"There are little things that come up here and there—little blips—but the major players [in animation] aren't pushing themselves. Technically, [the industry] has made great leaps and bounds, but as storytellers—taking advantage of the animated form—we haven't done anything beyond what Disney did." *Samurai Jack* has great potential to shatter such stereotypes, shifting lanes onto a road less traveled.

Episode three (the last part of a 90-minute movie presentation) is entirely dedicated to the mashing of mechanical beetles. 20 minutes, from start to finish, has our fearless samurai slicing *Johnny Quest*-bred robots, utilizing his environment as a coliseum-sized ambush. A nearby mine provides sharp, crystal shards for a deadly pit of impalement, the jet engines of docked airships are the perfect tool to cook the robo insects—each and every trap playing a intricate role in the motivated, strategically plotted battle sequence. Jack, clad in wooden sandals and a white kimono, is a one-man war—a single body pitted against the *Planet of the Apes*.

Then couple his *Crouching Tiger* ballet of dices and flails with a stylized, techno-mixed soundtrack to complete the package.

"Because we push the visuals so much, I definitely wanted the music to support it. I started listening to a lot of world DJs—a lot of international music. Music from Morocco and Turkey and Spain and all these different places where DJs are bringing their culture into modern, techno and hip-hop music. I really liked that idea. Let's say Jack enters a village and there's some kind of weird aliens living there. We would base the aliens on an ancient culture—let's say Morocco, for example. [Then] we would twist it so it would be future Moroccan. So when we do the music, we take the foundation of Moroccan music but twist and put new instruments and back beats to it so it sounds like a hip-hop version of belly-dancing music."

Once sweetened and shrink-wrapped, *Jack* is a package that is difficult to ignore. But considering the show airs on Cartoon Network, a cable outlet with a demographic of pre-driver's license youth—and much, much younger—how can executives justify such an experimental, meditated action riff?

"When adults make cartoons for kids, they pander to them. They dumb them down. They over-explain things. Like when somebody picks up a pen and they say, 'Oh, I have to pick up this pen.' It sounds silly, but it's all over television. Kids are smart."

So is Cartoon Network. 26 episodes of *Samurai Jack* are currently percolating.

JON M GIBSON

'RIPPING' TIME

John K, the man behind the gross-out antics of *Ren and Stimpy*, discuss[illegible] most macho creation yet

Cartoons—they frolic in the background of our lives, helping define the eras in which they were born. They are the first form of entertainment we see as the world comes into focus; and we outgrow them as puberty sets in, only to rediscover 'toons in the throngs of teenage substance abuse. Later, irony unravels as we often leave this world looking like one.

Spumco, the creators of *Ren and Stimpy*—perhaps the single best cartoon ever—live on the cutting edge of such toonology. They know what makes cartoons tick—and then blow up. Their latest, *Ripping Friends*—a hurling mass of testosterone and bad behavior—is too cool for TV. (Seriously, we aren't worthy. Put it on NBC's "Must See" block and the world would be a better place.) As much a return to the heyday of cartoons as it is pure lunacy, *Ripping Friends* reawakens the fun that life slowly eats away—if you let it. Where else can underpants become evil beings?

John Kricfalusi, creator of the animated farce, indulges in some manly conversation:

I'm about the biggest *Ripping Friends* fan known to man.
JK: You're probably the only one so far.

No Way! It's amazing!
JK: Really? I didn't think anybody saw it yet.

It seems that you're returning to the heyday of animation. While kids get into the show, if you read between the lines, it's as much for adults.
JK: Uh...no. It's totally written for kids. I think it's cool if adults are gonna watch it, but it sure isn't written for them. Actually, anything that's even remotely adult gets cut out.

Like what?
JK: Not a lot. There was a scene where Frictor and The Ripping Friends conducted a scientific experiment that ran awry—which, of course, always happens. In the experiment, they accidentally created a monster that could destroy the world. He-Mom finds out about it and she goes: 'Did you create another monster that could destroy the world?' / 'I'm so afraid, He-mom.' / 'Well, we'll have to have some discipline then!' She goes over to the kitchen and there is a shelf full of frying pans and each frying pan is labeled. The first one says 'Bacon Frying Pan,' the second one says 'Egg Frying Pan,' then 'Ham Frying Pan,' etc. Then all the way at the bottom you see 'Spanking Frying Pan.' Well, she picks that one up and Crag turns around and bends over. She smacks him in the butt and he goes crashing through the wall. To me, that was a totally innocent, relatively tame cartoon joke.

Absolutely!
JK: Well, we got reprimanded for child abuse!

But he's not a child...
JK: Yeah, he's 36 years old! I argued like crazy about that one, but I couldn't get them to allow it. Every network has a Broadcast Standards Department. It's their job to find things that only psychologists might not like, 'cause nobody else would ever read that much into it. In old cartoons, they hit each other the head with frying pans!

Yeah, they flattened skulls!
JK: The whole point of He-Mom is that she's a severe disciplinarian, and she raised The Ripping Friends, and that's why they're so manly—but we can't show any discipline. Another thing: They're supposed to punch her all the time. Like when they go to bed and she goes to tuck them in, she demands a 'goodnight punch'—and they all turn around and punch her. We had two of them punch her in the ribs and the other two punch her in the head. She's out of it for a few seconds—then she shakes her head and she's back to normal. She loves it! Well, we had to change that 'cause apparently you can't show kids punching their mother in the head. The Standards person says that kids will be traumatized if they see that.

So what inspired your character designs this time out?
JK: I'm a big Marvel fan—the old Marvel comics, with Jack Kirby and Stan Lee. I'm also a big fan of my partner Jim Smith who draws great action characters. He does funny action characters better than anyone I've ever seen in my life. He would draw Conan all the time and caricatures of Jack Kirby characters. When I created *The Ripping Friends*, I had it in mind that Jim would be the lead artist.

'I can't stand to look at it. The storyboards are a lot better looking than the final [product]—and they get toned down every step of the way. No more detail. Just better poses, better drawings.'

Currently, what are some of you're favorite animated series?
JK: I don't really watch anything new. I just watch old stuff. I watch *Superfriends* 'cause it's funny. It is the worst cartoon ever, but I still watch it.

Who does the animation on *Ripping Friends*? There was a joke in one of the episodes that it was sent to Korea.
JK: Yeah

So why does it look better than just about everything else on Saturday morning TV?
JK: I'm glad that you think that, but I don't.

You don't?
JK: I think it looks like crap.

No, I think it looks great!
JK: I can't stand to look at it. The storyboards are a lot better looking than the final [product]—and they get toned down every step of the way. No more detail. Just better poses, better drawings.

The animation is done overseas and changed from the artist's original work?
JK: The thing about animation is that so many people in so many different departments take the same scene and do something to it. For example, I write the scene, then it goes to the storyboard artist and he draws his interpretation of it—and maybe he just doesn't get what I was trying to show—so he draws something that doesn't quite make the point I was going for. Then it goes to a layout artist who is supposed to pose it. Well, that guy takes those storyboards and then tones them down. All of a sudden, they're not as funny—not as dynamic. Then that set of drawings goes to Korea, and they tone it down even further.

You can't intercept it at any point?
JK: Oh man, I've been trying like crazy! We could do it on 'Ren and Stimpy' because we did everything in-house—and I was right there. We did *Ren and Stimpy* for twice as much as what we're doing 'Ripping Friends' for...Wouldn't you guys like to know the inspiration behind the show?

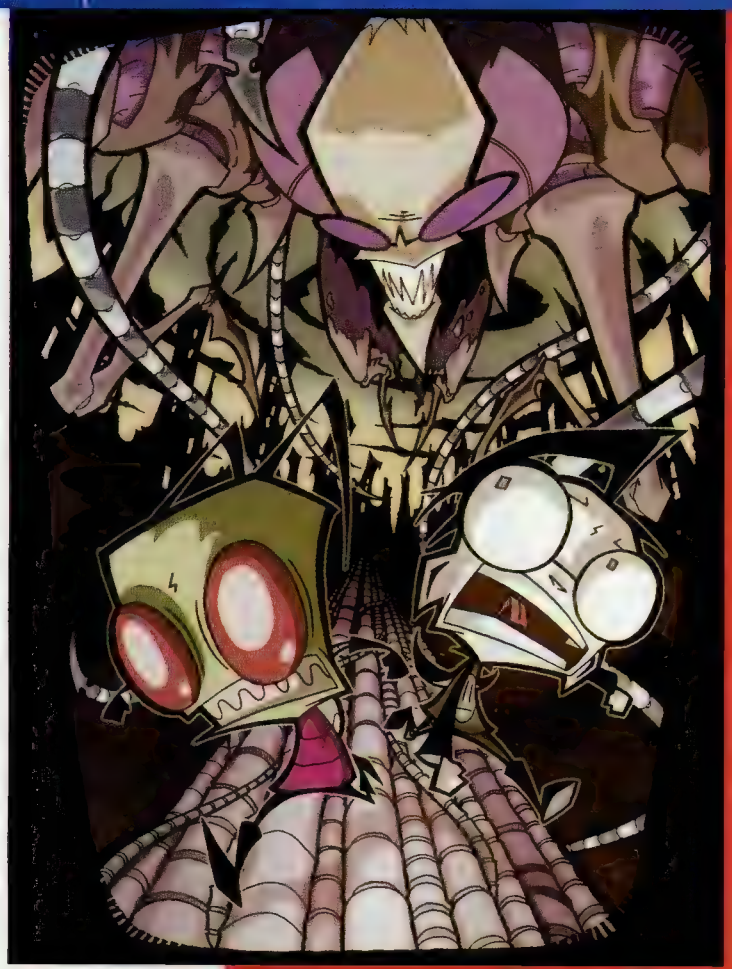
Uh...sure.
JK: When I first started working, it was during the worst period of animation—the 1980s. That's when all the cartoons were supposed to be good for you.

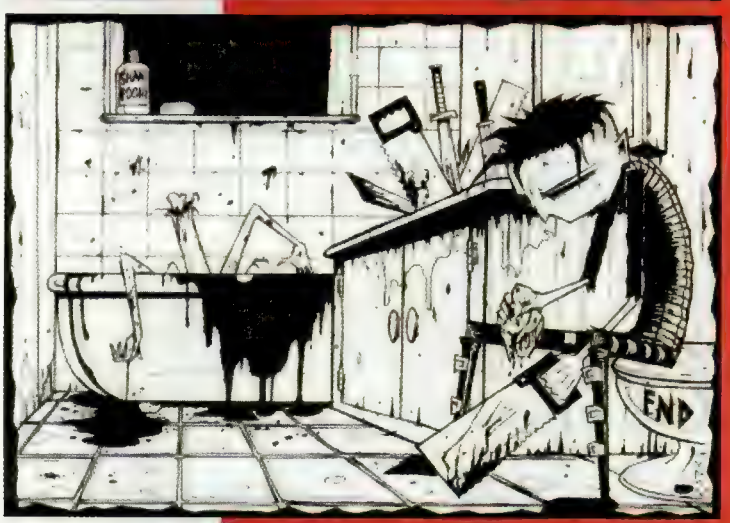
The era of morals?
JK: Yeah. Everything on TV was just completely terrible. It was all moralistic stuff. There was the *Get-Along Gang* and *Carebears*, and all of the stories were about how you should share everything—and love everybody—and all that sort of crap. Which, of course, nobody really believes. That generation of kids is grown up now and the ones who grew up on that stuff are all wimpy. They're all sensitive and shit. They wear earrings and crap. They're all wearing tattoos—which sucks. In the old days, if you had a tattoo it meant that you were ready to kick some ass. But now the guys with tattoos—anybody could kick their ass. It's crazy! So I needed to make a show that would make kids who wouldn't be sensitive when they grow up—one that prepares them for the real world. 'Cause the wimpy kids grow up and think that everybody shares. My show prepares them for the corporate world. You've got to learn that there is conflict in the world. That was what was cool about all the old cartoons—like 'Popeye.' I loved 'Popeye'—the black-and-white ones. They had the greatest beatings in them. It was totally real.

So *Ripping Friends* is for people who eat steak?
YK: That's for sure.

If I came home with an earring my Dad would have pounded me.
YK: Me too. And what's the deal with young guys hugging each other? It's just so phony. I mean, what guy wants to hug another guy? You have to be trained to do that. No one is that sensitive. The only way I'm gonna touch another guy is with my fist. Well, that's what this cartoon is for—to stop that crap.

So, is there any chance that you might revisit *t*?
YK: Well, they're not knocking my door down. I will if they ask me to.





From top: Zim and Dib scared witless; Johnny relaxes after a rough day of murder; the adorable Squee

ALIEN 'INVADER'

Jhonen Vasquez: His cynical flair—grossly charming—turned the underground comic *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac* into an industry success. Now he's brought his tangled, hyper-cool imagination to the small screen, animating the weekly misadventures of *Invader Zim*, tackling everything from garden gnomes to social rebellion. His insightful wit follows:

Cell-Shading?

JV: *Futurama* beat us to the game while I was in development, but it was great because I had an example to point at. I kept saying how cool it would be to do cell-shaded CG stuff, mainly based on what I'd seen in certain video games. The *Futurama* came out and they had cell-shading—which I was really bummed about. We were still in pre-pilot stage.

Mechs?

JV: Because the show is so prop heavy—it's so design heavy—most of the design guys hate me. There's a lot of work for them to do. There are a lot of robots, spaceships, and more and more as we go along. They think, 'Ah, we've designed enough spaceships, we can reuse them now.' I'm like, 'No, no, no. This is a completely new alien race; we've never seen them before. And they fly completely different spaceships and they pilot different robots.'

Censors?

JV: One of the episodes, called the 'The Girl Who Cried Gnome,' is about a little girl who gets trapped on Zim's lawn—not at all terrorist related. He tries to have her destroyed. But she's just selling cookies—and he's *so* paranoid that he doesn't want her coming anywhere near his door. So he sends off a little gopher that digs a hole underneath her foot and traps her. Suddenly, there's this huge media circus as they're trying to figure out how to get her foot out of the hole. Apparently, that was making fun of the rescue attempt. It's stunning! That's the kind of stuff that's *very* difficult to fight immediately because you're blown away at how stupid it is. [Censors] really look for some odd stuff—*really* weird stuff.

Nickelodeon?

JV: I need to have a lot broader sense of humor. For the most part, I think we succeeded. But there's still a stigma of [*Zim*] being a kid's show—a little, goofy kid's show—because of where it is. It hasn't really been pushed as anything all that different. It's a very ugly, cellar baby on this network.

Fantasyland?

JV: As you get older, it's no longer just so bright and shiny—you're also carrying along detritus from heaven thrown up here and there. All these other little disappointments, too: Where are the robots, where is my flying car? *That* goes into the show—[my] freakish, unpleasant sensation about the planet. From Zim's point of view, it's just a place to destroy. From Dib's point of view, it's a place to rescue—but he doesn't really like it that much. People are so mean to him. It's almost supernatural—the extent in which people don't listen to him. It's a happy, happy show. It's *so* uplifting.

Mockery?

JV: Everything can be seen and laughed at. Which is hard, because there are things that are apparently going to be offensive. In the first episode, we had a kid named 'Old Kid' who was like a tiny, old man. [Censors] thought we were making fun of kids with accelerated aging.

Gnomes?

JV: I don't like gnomes. I don't want gnomes on my yard. I just like the idea that Zim thinks that they're normal—so he just riddles his lawn with them—and that they're evil henchmen that do his bidding. I can tolerate gnomes if they're evil henchmen.

JON M GIBSON

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SONY AIBO ERS-311/312

Whenever I see an Aibo, I think of Woody Allen's 1972 classic *Sleeper*, in which he inquires of a robot dog, "He's not going to run around and leave little batteries all over the place, is he?" Thankfully, Sony has avoided this little bit of robotic verisimilitude, but this latest generation of Aibo is the most advanced. This time around, Sony has added voice command, taking us one step closer to a truly bizarre future. These are the baby steps to a gloriously frightening new world.

APPLE
www.apple.com
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APPLE iPOD MP3/HD

Apple design strikes again. Witness the amazing new iPod, a 5GB firewire hard-drive that can hold and play back over 1000 songs. Yes, you can put nearly a hundred CDs into a device about the size of a pack of cigarettes. Connect the thing to a Mac with firewire and you can download an entire CD into the device in under 10 seconds. As an added bonus, you can also use the iPod as a portable hard-drive, ferrying large documents from home to office with a few hundred songs to keep you entertained on the run. Amazing.

BMW
www.streetcarver.com
$500

BMW STREETCARVER

With all of the airborne antics going on in modern skating, one must not loose sight of the essence of the sport. Once upon a time, buzzed high-schoolers in Rector shorts strapped extra-wide Tracker trucks onto 42-inch Maharaja boards to carve down car-riddled slopes in search of spirituality. (Had BMW sculpted this super skateboard back then, there'd be a lot less skin on the streets.) The BMW StreetCarver may be a $500 skateboard, but with aluminum axles based on the chassis of the original Five Series, it just may be worth it.

MALAGUTI
www.malagutiusa.com
$2,600

MALAGUTI PHANTOM

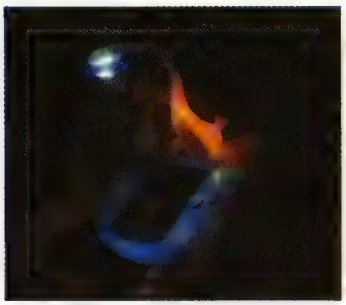
After marketing internships on easy street—EA, Coca Cola, Sony—Joel Martin needed a challenge, so he shifted his sights to turning America onto Italy's most prized scooter franchise: Malaguti (I thought it was a duck, too). With Gas prices higher than Red Bull, what better time to strap on the old skid-lid and buzz around town like a paisan. The liquid cooled 50cc Phantom Digit (pictured) will only set you back around $2600—and it's one stylin' scooter. For a little more, you can get into the F.12 model, a 100cc job that'll really blow your hair back (or whatever's sticking out your helmet, that is).

VIALTA
www.vialta.com
$299

VIALTA ViDVD

All-in-one boxes are indeed an intriguing proposition. They're probably the wave of the future. Here, we have one such multitalented box, the Vialta ViDVD. It not only plays DVDs—but also CDs, MP3 encoded CDs, Photo CDs and even Karaoke discs with its included microphone. Not only that, but it also comes with a built-in 56k modem and wireless keyboard for simple internet browsing. All features work as advertised—and the machine boasts good DVD playback. But there's no denying that the build feels cheap, and some brand snobbery keeps it from being completely desirable.

GO NYKO



You'll see a few of these GBA FM tuners out there, but beware—most barely work. We tested them all and Nyko's was by far the best. Simply click the scan button up to lock in your favorite FM radio station. Now that Howard Stern midget/prostitute fashion show is just a click away—no matter where you are! Plus, the earphones won't send you to the emergency room.

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TEES

The only thing worse than not wearing pants to school is not having the coolest T-shirt. These threads from Game Skins fit any gamer's lifestyle, from the old-school *Gauntlet* fanatic to a more modern PC pitbull. But if the electronic age isn't your liter of gas, try on more industrial designs from Action. Angry robots, sexy hackers and fushu students are all silk-screened for your wearing pleasure.

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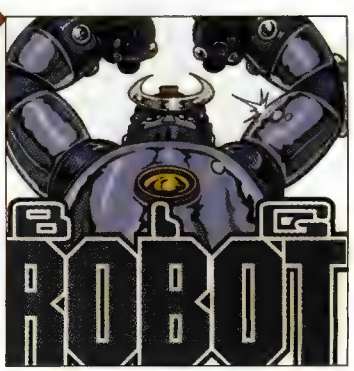

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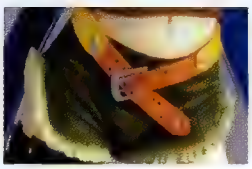

Take Tidus home

I remember a time when video-game toys were as scarce as music videos on MTV, but nowadays—when it comes to the big games—you can usually find them at your local EB, Toy's 'R Us, Suncoast or Babbage's right around launch time. Such is the case with Koto's *Final Fantasy X* series hitting shops between February and April 2002. Pictured: (1) The 12-inch Tidus action figure; (2) 12" Yuna and Auron Vinyl statues; (3) the Rikku and Kamahri 12" PVC; (4) and the Bahamut deluxe action figure. The quality is amazing for the price, from $25-35.

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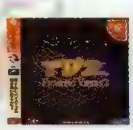
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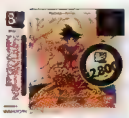
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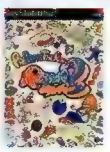
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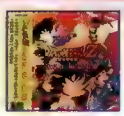
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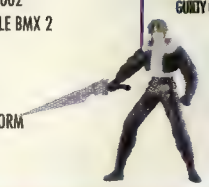

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MICHEAL JACKSON
INVINCIBLE

If you wipe away all of the cruel innuendo surrounding one of the most talented artists ever born into this world and just concentrate on the work, you find yourself submerged in much of *Invincible*. Even when a song falls short, as a select few do—like "2000 Watts"—his seething vocal style elevates them off of mediocrity's doorstep. Mike seems to be settling into new skin as a legend more than a popstar these days. The need to coat every song with layers of pop veneer has finally past. Songs like the beautiful and graceful "Break of Dawn" and "Speechless" are magical, and the sultry, refreshingly retro "Butterflies" denote Michael's incredible range. *Invincible* doesn't have Janet's hooks, but it has a certain maturity that makes it as vital. We're so lucky to have them both. There's a lot of magic on *Invincible* and—like it or not—a lot of love. Oh, and for the record, I think he *looks* cool too. Check the CD cover–tell me that doesn't look like Link circa N64.

DAVE HALVERSON

GARBAGE
BEAUTIFUL GARBAGE

There's no denying the infectious appeal of the electronic coils and crunching guitars that bend and twist around the pop-drenched songs on *Beautiful Garbage*, the rather unbeatable but immensely listenable third effort from the highly evolved Garbage. What makes this slick album click is the way drummer Butch Vig is able to layer ingenuity over a consistently base foundation of music. The album is a heterogeneous collection of styles, blended together for a smooth mix that receives a strong kick from Shirley Manson's propulsive vocals. On the radio-friendly "Androgyny," Manson throws out her words with a sexy snap: "Out of the tree, go pick a plumb / Why can't we all just get along?" *Beautiful Garbage* holds many surprises. Its razor-sharp edge definitely delivers a satisfying slice of pounding pop.

BRADY FIECHTER

JOY DROP
VIBERATE

Never heard of Joy Drop? Well, neither had I until someone was smart enough to park it at a listening station. If you like your rock with a female up front, this is one CD you absolutely cannot afford to pass up. After the first track, "Thick Skin," I thought, "It must be the bait, leading with the best song"—but by the time I arrived at "Life on the Sun," I was so an owner. This is a rare find. Tara Stone's vocals are infinitely palatable—neither too squeaky nor deep—when she wants to she can make the hair on the back of your neck stand up. There's a little Alanis in "American Dreamgirl," but otherwise she's all rocker. Joydrop's overall flavor is distinctly hard rock—no metal or rap to be found. When the need arises, it doesn't get much better.

DAVE HALVERSON

P.O.D.
SATELLITE

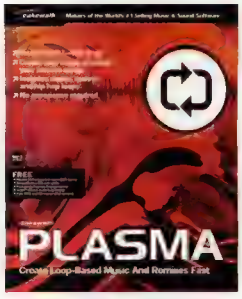
This isn't the way it's supposed to work. When bands rock—and rock hard—they typically wrap their roiling guitars and guttural screams with anthems of depression, hopelessness and aggression. But on *Satellite*, P.O.D's follow-up to the marginally competent and equally heavy-hitting *X*, the structured noise is inspired by the heavens. On "Alive," a perfectly fitting release for our current times, Sonny sings, "Every day is a new day / I'm thankful for every breath I take." P.O.D live—not for the day or themselves—but for the life of a greater moment: "Shape me in my brokenness / Empower me forever." They have much to be thankful for, namely their gift of making one of the strongest, lacerating rock albums of the year. More sophisticated, dense and even-handed than P.O.D.'s debut, *Satellite* reaches unexpected heights with its surging expression and fiery melody. Throw your hands to the heavens and rage all you like.

BRADY FIECHTER

OZZY
DOWN TO EARTH

He's metal's most cuddly heathen, living life to its excessive fullest—been up, been down, but he's always rocked the holy shit out of the place for his fans. With his 13th solo CD, Ozzy strikes the perfect balance—metal steeped in tradition yet in step with the times. Beyond the somewhat commercial and methodical "Gets Me Through," you'll find solace in the Sabbath-like "Black Illusion" and "Alive," then look for an Eddie Van Halen crossing on "No Easy Way Out"—the CD's best single. Then, just when your girlfriend starts barking for more Backstreet buttholes, you can shift into chill mode with "Dreamer," "Running Out of Time" and "You Know," the CD's three anthem-style "I'm Coming Home" equivalents. Ozzy's voice still sounds incredible—as if he's part cyborg—and Zakk Wylde whales on guitar, dishing out chafing riffs that'll make your muffler rattle, along with an occasional ear-drum-shattering whine and enough spaghetti to feed Tony Soprano. The human Energizer Bunny just keeps on kicking ass—cloak-wrapped and bushy tailed. The real Ozzy? Read the special thanks on this one. You can't download those!

DAVE HALVERSON



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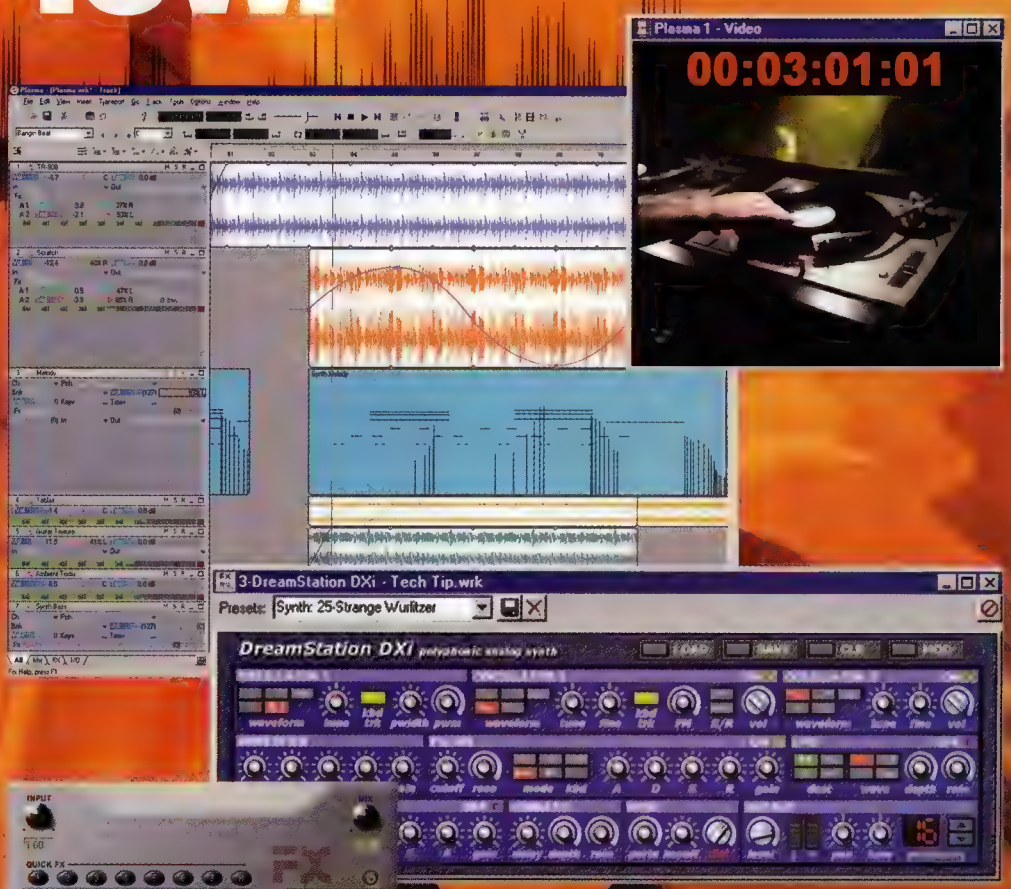

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